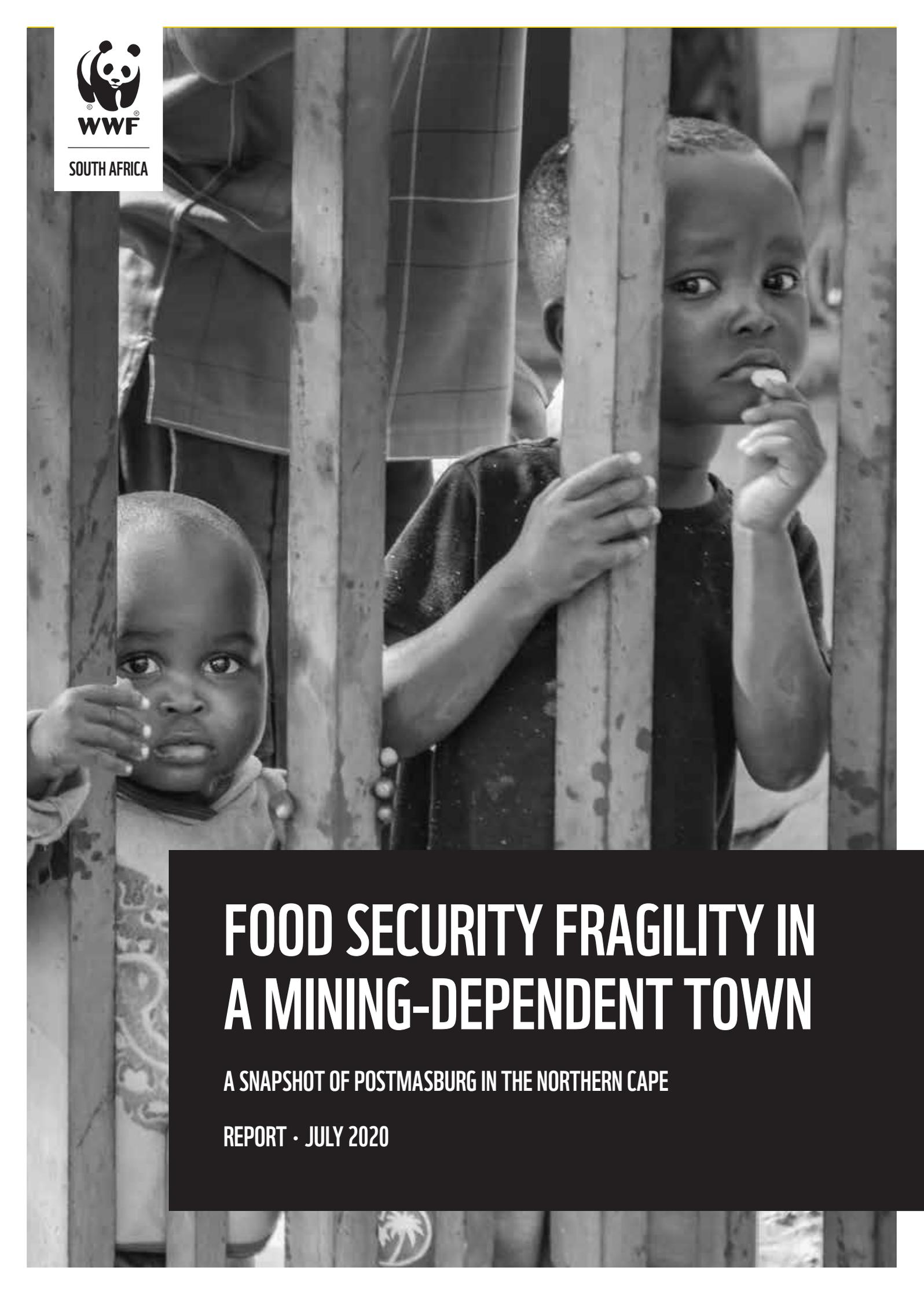




SOUTH AFRICA

A black and white photograph showing two young children in a shack made of vertical wooden planks. The child on the right is looking out and eating a piece of food. The child on the left is looking towards the camera.

# FOOD SECURITY FRAGILITY IN A MINING-DEPENDENT TOWN

A SNAPSHOT OF POSTMASBURG IN THE NORTHERN CAPE

REPORT · JULY 2020

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# A SNAPSHOT OF FOOD SECURITY IN POSTMASBURG

- Postmasburg has a higher-than-average household size and a high dependency ratio. This points to a population that is disproportionately vulnerable to household food insecurity.
- After lockdown there has been a 20% fall in formal employment levels and a 62% plunge in the number of people generating informal-sector income.
- Monthly household incomes have fallen by 21% since lockdown.
- 22% of households have no one formally or informally employed (four of these 26 households also do not receive any social grants).
- There is a general perception that food costs have increased substantially since lockdown.
- The widening gap on food spend between households since lockdown points to growing inequality and exposes shifts in vulnerability to food insecurity.
- It is estimated that 60% of households surveyed were already below the 2020 StatsSA Food Poverty Line before lockdown.
- 44% of households reported having to borrow money to buy food since lockdown.
- Loan sharks and spaza shops offer credit to purchase food.
- Only 27,5% of households surveyed reported receiving a food parcel, and then only two months after lockdown started.
- The 1 000 food parcels distributed by the government were supplemented with about 2 000 more from mining companies and other institutions.
- An estimated 6 000 households need monthly food aid.
- Altogether 76% of households said they were not confident that they would be able to access food parcels if they needed them.
- Many needy people were not registered on the Department of Social Development's system because of the social stigma associated with being seen standing in line at a soup kitchen.
- Closing of schools and the suspension of the National School Nutrition Programme during lockdown have intensified pressure on household food budgets.
- There is no culture of growing one's own vegetables nor an understanding of how much home-grown food can save a household.
- Even before lockdown, Postmasburg was food stressed. After lockdown, many people are experiencing hunger.
- A coordinated, strategic approach is needed to avoid the severe repercussions of not responding timeously and effectively to the substantial increase in food insecurity that has arisen after the onset of COVID-19 and the related lockdown.

**DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC,**

**STAKEHOLDERS WHO HAVE OFTEN BEEN**

**GUILTY OF TALKING PAST ONE ANOTHER**

**HAVE COLLABORATED IN A COORDINATED**

**WAY ON BOTH HEALTH MATTERS AND**

**FOOD AID. ARGUABLY THE TIME IS RIGHT**

**TO SEEK A NEW SOCIAL COMPACT THAT**

**PRIORITISES REDUCING HOUSEHOLD FOOD**

**INSECURITY AND VULNERABILITY TO**

**MULTI-DIMENSIONAL POVERTY.**

# CONTEXT

High levels of food insecurity existed across South Africa prior to the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020.

To obtain a snapshot of food security and related issues in the mining town of Postmasburg in the Northern Cape, Mining Dialogues 360° (MD360°) undertook a 120-household purposive telephonic survey during lockdown utilising the networks and services of a local youth organisation (Project 8420). This was supplemented by 21 interviews with key informants. The survey was a follow-on to the community consultation work that MD360° had previously undertaken in the second half of 2019.

the growing local population of job seekers. Furthermore, without the development of an enlarged local tax base, municipal systems and services are struggling to cope.

In a town where high levels of food insecurity predated COVID-19, fears are growing about what will happen in the short term as the pandemic worsens, and in the medium to longer term as the mines mature and move towards ultimate closure. In 2017, the Northern Cape had the highest proportion of households faced with “severely inadequate access to food”, the highest proportion of child hunger (5 years or younger) and the second lowest level of adequate household access to food (StatsSA, General Household Survey 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically exposed and amplified these high levels of vulnerability and social weakness, especially for those on the margins of the economy.

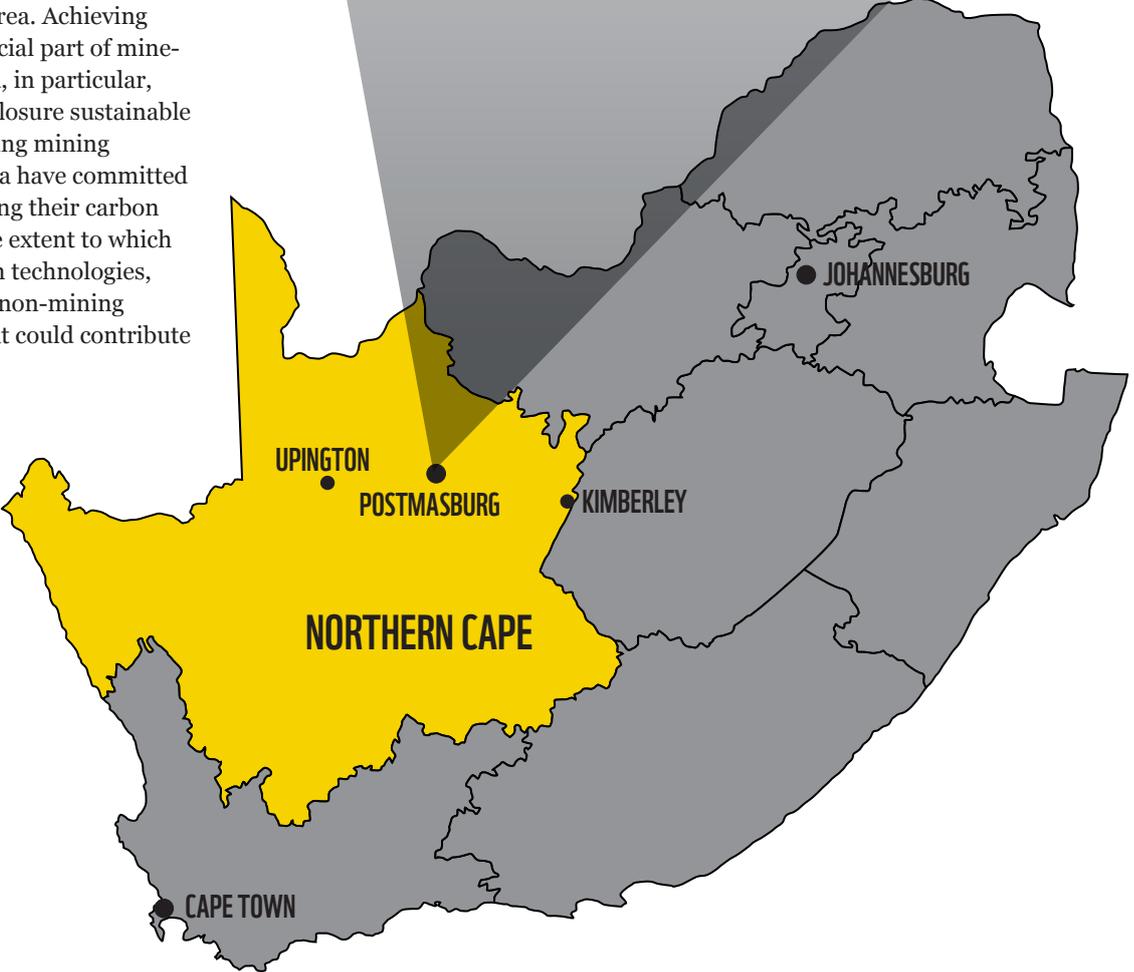
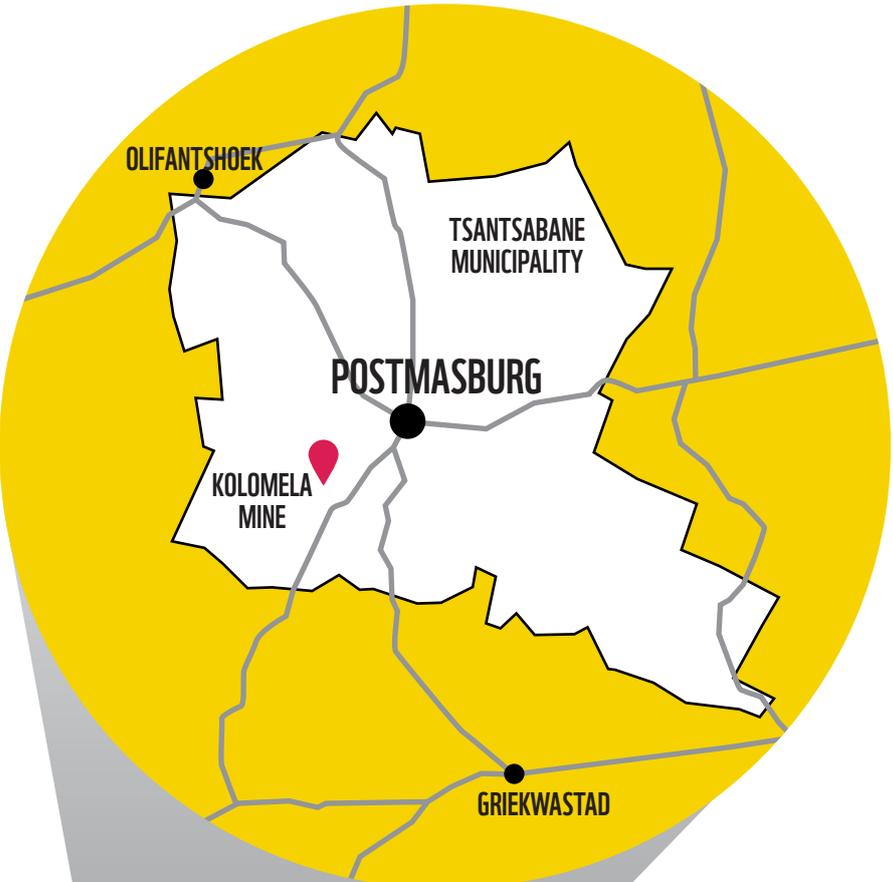
MEMBERS OF A  
POSTMASBURG  
YOUTH ORGANISATION,  
PROJECT 8420,  
MEETING WITH  
MD360° TO DISCUSS  
THE SURVEY,  
OCTOBER 2019.

Postmasburg is the closest town to a number of large and medium-scale iron-ore mines in the Tsantsabane Local Municipality. Commissioning of the Kolomela Mine in 2011 led to a massive influx of people into the town. In the intervening years, a local enclave economy has developed with few local economic linkages. As a result, there has been a lack of job creation to accommodate



**THE TOWN OF POSTMASBURG PROVIDES AN INTERESTING CASE STUDY FOR HOW A JUST TRANSITION TO TRANSFORMATIVE MINE CLOSURE MIGHT TAKE PLACE IN A CLIMATICALLY DIFFERENT REGION TO, FOR INSTANCE, THE COAL-BELT TOWNS OF MPUMALANGA.**

The food security survey was designed to provide a snapshot of local knowledge that could be used to inform strategies for the reduction of short- and long-term food insecurity in the wider Tsantsabane area. Achieving this end will be a crucial part of mine-closure planning and, in particular, planning for a post-closure sustainable local economy. Leading mining companies in the area have committed themselves to reducing their carbon emissions and, to the extent to which they adopt new green technologies, could stimulate new non-mining economic growth that could contribute to a just transition.



# KEY RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY

An extract of the key headline findings arising from the survey is presented below. The survey elicited data that reflected household demographic, economic and food expenditure and purchasing patterns, as well as data on interrelated aspects of food security during and after lockdown.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

The pre-March 2020 lockdown average household size (4,3 persons) was significantly higher than the national average (3,4 persons per household) and increased slightly to 4,4 persons after lockdown.

When combined with the relatively high household size, an especially high number of young economically inactive persons in the sample population (37% versus 29% for the Northern Cape province) means that the lockdown household dependency ratio was 73 compared to 52 for South Africa as a whole.

The higher-than-average household size and a high dependency ratio point to a population that is disproportionately vulnerable to household food insecurity.



<b>BEFORE LOCKDOWN</b>	<b>78%</b> OF HOUSEHOLDS HAD ONE OR MORE MEMBERS FORMALLY OR INFORMALLY EMPLOYED BEFORE LOCKDOWN		<b>22%</b> OF HOUSEHOLDS HAVE NO MEMBER FORMALLY OR INFORMALLY EMPLOYED
	<b>FORMAL EMPLOYMENT</b>	<b>INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT</b>	<b>NO EMPLOYMENT</b>
<b>FALL IN EMPLOYMENT</b>	<b>↓ 20%</b>	<b>↓ 62%</b>	<b>UNCHANGED</b>
<b>FALL IN INCOME FOR HOUSEHOLDS</b>	<b>↓ 17%</b> WITH ONE OF MORE MEMBERS FORMALLY EMPLOYED	<b>↓ 36%</b> WITH NO ONE IN FORMAL EMPLOYMENT	
<b>POST LOCKDOWN AVERAGE INCOME</b>	<b>↓ 15%</b> DOWN FROM R10 386 TO R8 775	<b>↓ 24%</b> DOWN FROM R4 656 TO R3 562	<b>UNCHANGED</b>

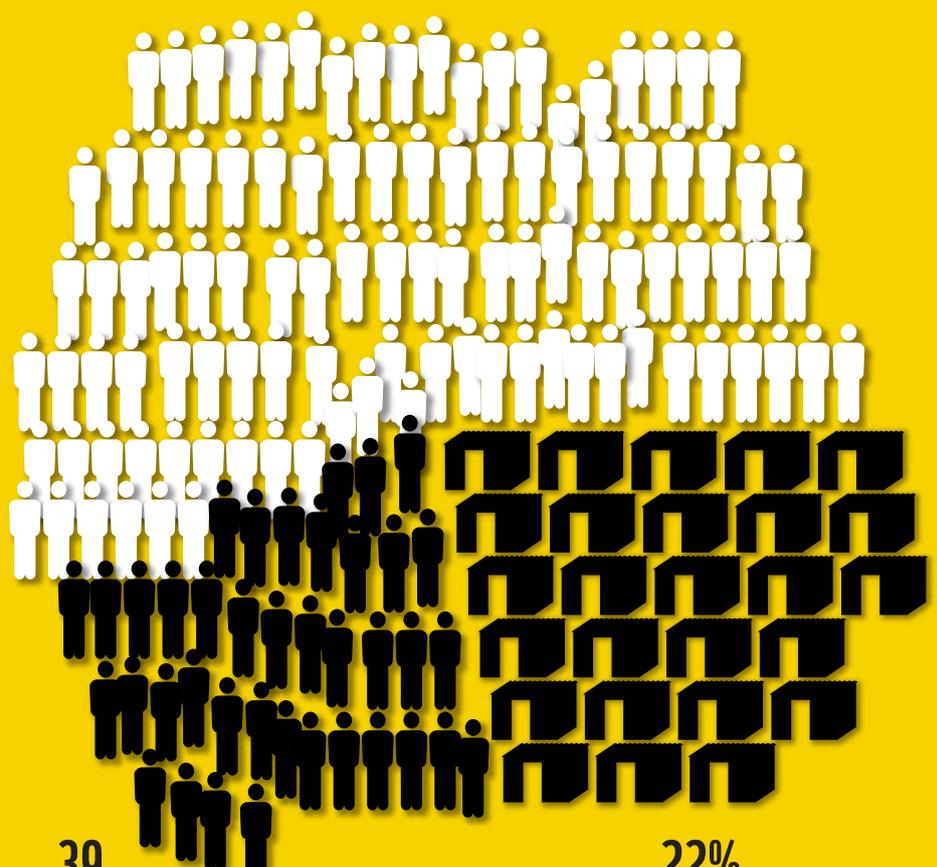
## EMPLOYMENT

In 26 (22%) households no one was either formally or informally employed. (While 22 of them receive grants, four do not.) These households appear to be reliant on social grants payments, remittances or charity in their efforts to achieve at least minimum food poverty levels.

A 20% fall in formal employment levels and a 62% plunge in the numbers of people generating an income in the informal sector after lockdown have had a profound effect on the ability of the households concerned to meet their food and other basic needs.

Alternatively stated, 39 out of a total of 142 formally or informally employed persons across 94 of the 120 households experienced a complete loss of income following lockdown.

**103**  
PEOPLE RETAINED SOME LEVEL OF  
INCOME/EMPLOYMENT AFTER LOCKDOWN

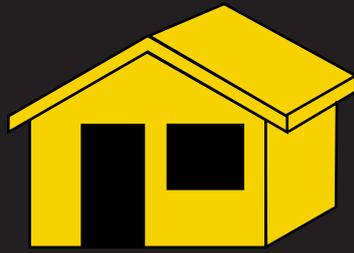


**39**  
PEOPLE PREVIOUSLY EMPLOYED  
HAVE COMPLETE LOSS OF INCOME  
AFTER LOCKDOWN

**22%**  
OF HOUSEHOLDS HAD NO  
EMPLOYMENT BEFORE LOCKDOWN

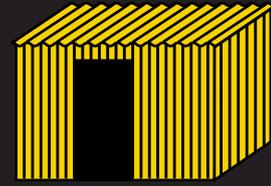
Shack-dwelling households suffered relatively higher formal job losses than those in formal housing after lockdown. They also experienced a relatively higher fall in the percentage of persons generating income from informal sources (78%) than those living in formal housing (59%), highlighting their higher relative levels of vulnerability to external shocks.

### INCOME FROM INFORMAL SOURCES



↓ 59%

INCOME EARNERS IN FORMAL HOUSING



↓ 78%

INCOME EARNERS IN SHACK DWELLINGS

## HOUSEHOLD INCOME

For the 92 households that were prepared to disclose it, household incomes fell 21% in aggregate after lockdown, from R749 200 to R591 600 per month. This is reflected in the fact that the mean monthly household income fell from R8 143,48 to R6 501,10. This is likely to have a negative impact across Postmasburg.

While incomes for households with one or more formally employed members fell on average by 17%, the corresponding figure for households with no one formally employed was 36%.

The relatively greater fall in mean monthly household income for shack-dwelling households (24%) compared to those living in formal housing (15%) correlates with the collapse in informal sector activity after the lockdown, as noted above.

### AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME PER HOUSEHOLD

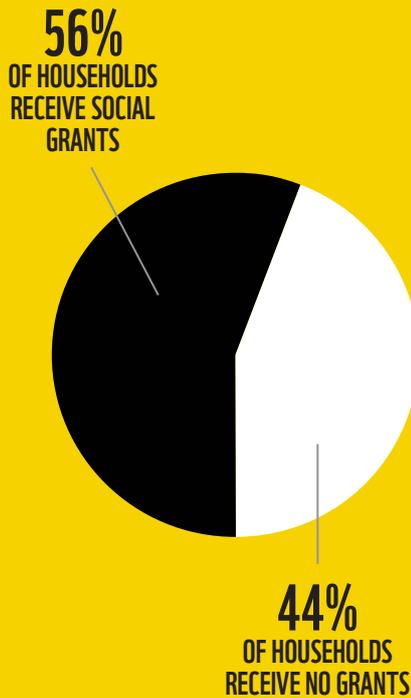
BEFORE  AFTER



↓ 21%

HOUSEHOLD INCOMES AFTER LOCKDOWN

# SOCIAL GRANTS - GENIE OUT OF THE BOTTLE



**22 of 26**  
HOUSEHOLDS WHERE NO ONE IS  
FORMALLY OR INFORMALLY EMPLOYED  
RECEIVE GRANTS

**4**  
HOUSEHOLDS RECEIVED NOTHING

The social grant system is the pillar that helps many families to buy food and stay alive in the face of significant job losses and reduced incomes. As mentioned before, 22% of households have no one formally or informally employed. Four of these 26 households also do not receive any social grants.

It was found that 67 grant recipient households receive a total of 155 social grants per month (with one household receiving nine grants) with an aggregate value of R115 440 per month. The announcement of grant increases on 24 April 2020 brought an increase of R78 250 to an aggregate of R193 690 from May 2020 onwards.

Average grant income per grant recipient household amounted to R1 722,99 per month before lockdown and R2 890,90 (i.e. a 67,7% increase) from May 2020 onwards.

Before lockdown, grant income represented 15% of aggregate income from all sources. Following the post-lockdown grant increases, this will have risen to 33%. This is clear evidence of an increased dependence on welfare payments.

*“If you’re dependent on a grant, then you are in trouble if you were supplementing the grant with piecework (skropwerkies) – doing domestic work or gardening.”*

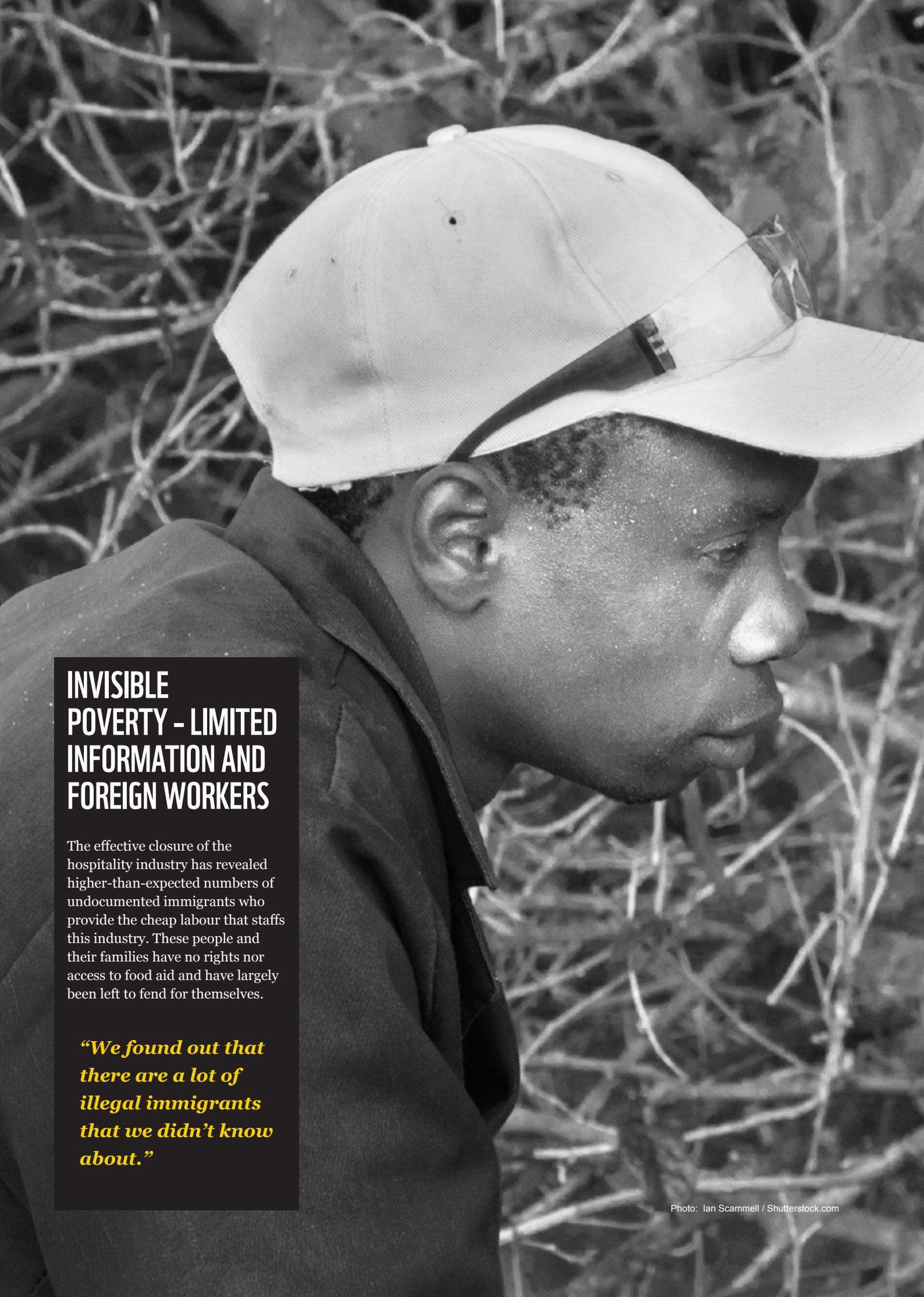
Once the six-month period during which grants have been temporarily increased expires, their combined value will return to R115 440 per month. This will reduce post-lockdown aggregate household income from R591 600 to R476 200 for the sample population. In other words, the initially observed 21% fall in aggregate household income after lockdown will worsen to 36,4% (unless there is some economic recovery by then).

In many instances, the temporarily increased grants are still not sufficient to cover basic household food needs. In this context, the return of grants to pre-lockdown levels may lead to severe social and fiscal repercussions.

## GRANT INCOME AS A PERCENTAGE OF AGGREGATE INCOME FROM ALL SOURCES



	BEFORE LOCKDOWN	AFTER TEMPORARY INCREASE
AVERAGE INCOME FROM GRANTS PER GRANT RECIPIENT HOUSEHOLD	<b>R1 723</b>	<b>R2 891</b>
		(FOR 6 MONTHS ONLY)



## INVISIBLE POVERTY - LIMITED INFORMATION AND FOREIGN WORKERS

The effective closure of the hospitality industry has revealed higher-than-expected numbers of undocumented immigrants who provide the cheap labour that staffs this industry. These people and their families have no rights nor access to food aid and have largely been left to fend for themselves.

***“We found out that there are a lot of illegal immigrants that we didn’t know about.”***



## FOOD AVAILABILITY - ACCESSIBLE BUT NOT AFFORDABLE

Although there had been no major disruptions in retail supply chains, there is a general perception that food costs have nevertheless increased substantially. The supermarkets and local stores deny excessive price hikes and there is no evidence to support these claims without more thorough investigation. However, every single key respondent interviewed spoke of an increase in food prices in the period since the first lockdown.

For the 92 households that disclosed their income, average monthly food spend was 25% of household income pre-lockdown and 35% post-lockdown, confirming the pressure that increased expenditure on food has placed on household budgets.

Before lockdown, expenditure on food ranged from as little as R300 to as much as R7 000 per month, with 67% of households spending R2 000 or less per month. After lockdown, the range of food expenditure widened to between R0 and R10 000 with those spending R2 000 or less per month falling to 53%.

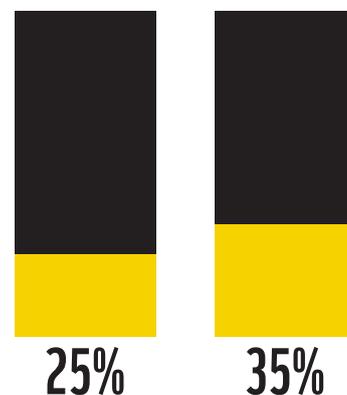
Some households say they spend 50% more on food than previously, while others reckon that on average prices have gone up by more than 20%.

***“Every month the family has the same grocery list. Now we are getting less groceries for the same amount of money.”***

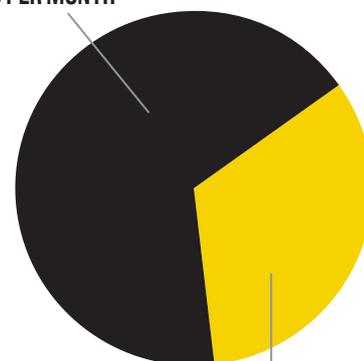
Altogether 58% of households already spent more than 50% of their income on food before lockdown, which supports suggestions that a large part of the Postmasburg population was probably food insecure and could even have been defined as “food poor” before the onset of COVID-19.

### FOOD SPENDING AS AGGREGATE OF MONTHLY INCOME

BEFORE  AFTER

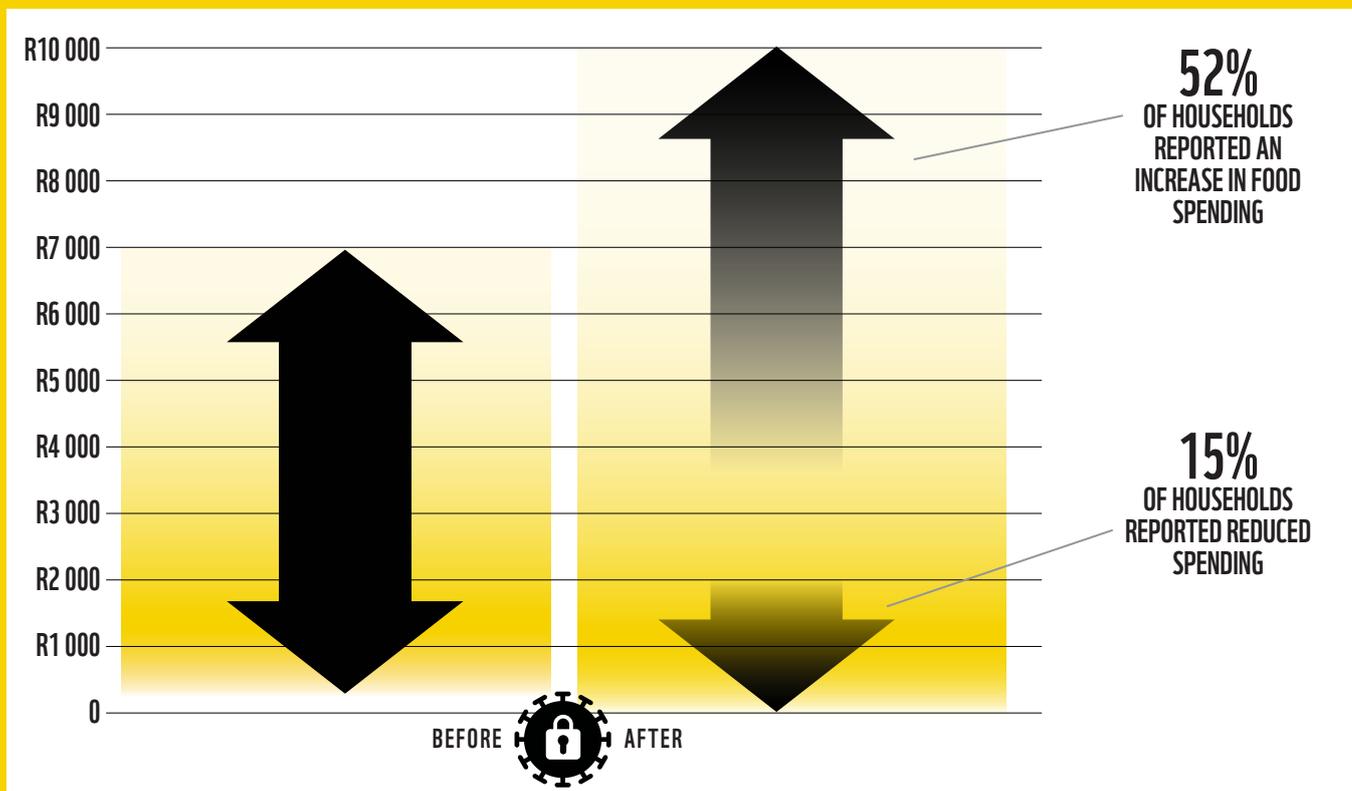


**67%**  
OF HOUSEHOLDS  
SPEND R2 000 OR  
LESS PER MONTH



**33%**  
OF HOUSEHOLDS  
SPEND MORE THAN  
R2 000 PER MONTH

**↑ 20%-50%**  
PERCEIVED INCREASE IN FOOD PRICES



While 52% of households reported that food spending had increased (averaging an additional R990 per month) after lockdown, 15% reported reduced spending (at a reduced average of R844 per month). The net effect of this is an emerging and increasing gap between what the two groups spend on food, from a factor of 1,2 times before lockdown to 2,8 times after lockdown.

This points to growing inequality and exposes quantitative and qualitative shifts in vulnerability to food insecurity and the impact of growing food poverty: the poor have lost income and cannot buy more food, resulting in increased food poverty. At the same time, those who can afford to buy more food will do so even though it may mean diverting financial resources from areas where reduced spending could see an increase in non-food poverty, e.g. health and education.

By using a StatsSA Food Poverty Line measure of R599,60, being the “rand value below which individuals are unable to purchase or consume enough food to supply them with the minimum per-capita-per-day energy requirement for human health”, it was possible to estimate that 60% of households surveyed were already below the 2020 Food Poverty Line before lockdown.

## SECURING FOOD - AT ANY COST

One interviewee claimed that “wholesalers are pricing goods at the same levels as retailers so there is no benefit to bulk-buying locally”. This, and the fact that travelling to a main centre to buy wholesale would not be cost effective, undermine the idea of people clubbing together or using stokvels to buy food cheaper to share among themselves.

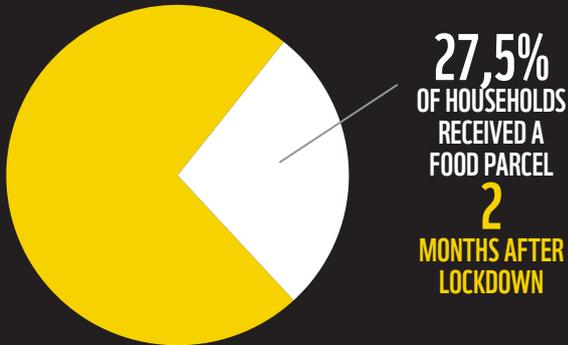
Nearly all spaza shops are foreign-owned, but they do collaborate to buy in bulk and supply one another, so they were able to keep well stocked once they could reopen with the easing of lockdown restrictions. Informal traders, hawkers and tuck-shop owners are mostly locals and they have either shut down or have had to hike prices to keep afloat.

Loan sharks and spaza shops offer credit for the purchase of food. Many grant recipients have gratefully taken up these loans but are struggling to service the debt when they are not paid at the end of the month. Interest rates from some loan sharks are quoted at between 20 and 25%, sometimes 50% of the loan amount.

***“People are having to eat less now ... with the little [money] that they have, it is given to loan sharks and spaza shops to repay what was borrowed before. This means we will forever be indebted to loan sharks and spaza shops.”***

# FOOD AID – INSUFFICIENT AND UNDERMINED

Despite the deleterious effects of lockdown on employment, household incomes and food expenditure, only 27,5% of households surveyed reported receiving a food parcel, and then only two months after lockdown started.



The Joint Operations Committee is coordinating the distribution of food parcels in conjunction with the Department of Social Development (DSD). According to key respondents within the committee, about 3 000 food parcels were distributed across Postmasburg in the 10-week period from the start of the lockdown. About 1 000 of these were provided by the government through SASSA. It is understood that Kumba Iron Ore, the SIOC Community Development Trust and other institutions also contributed.

The Joint Operations Committee realised that these food parcels had not covered even half of those in need of food. It estimates that approximately 6 000 households need monthly food aid on an ongoing basis, since not even the huge social spend on grants is enough to cater for all families.

Households in the settlements of Boichoko (36%) and Carnation (30%) received a disproportionate number of food parcels given that they represented only 25% and 10% of households surveyed.

Altogether 82% of households that received a food parcel had no one in formal employment after the lockdown.

Of households that received a food parcel, 67% also received one or more social grants (45 grants paid to 22 food-parcel recipient households).

Of households that received a food parcel, 82% reported that their pre-lockdown spending on food had either stayed the same or increased, raising doubts about criteria for food aid.

## Communication and confidence

Limited knowledge of the true extent of food aid needed has been exacerbated by weak communication and uncertainty about who is eligible and what the selection criteria are to qualify for receiving food parcels. The lack of communication, which is assumed to be controlled by the municipality and councillors from the Joint Operations Committee, leaves people confused and aggrieved.

***“But it was not clearly communicated, even though people went door to door to find out who needs food parcels. It was not communicated that food parcels were not going to be distributed monthly.”***

There is a widespread feeling that delivery of food parcels is a party-political matter that favours supporters of the ruling party, friends and family of councillors, and those with departmental influence in drawing up the lists.

A member of staff in the Department of Social Development acknowledged the problem, saying “There has been a lot of complaints and some community members going on strike about the criteria that is used to select the people who received the food parcel, as they do not understand the criteria itself.” There are also reports of discrepancies in the contents of food parcels with early deliveries containing many more items and more recent deliveries containing nowhere near enough to survive for a week, let alone a month.

Altogether 76% of households said that they were not confident that they would be able to access food parcels if they needed them.

***“They ... don’t give food parcels to anyone who is not in their own group. Hulle murg jou uit!”***

**3 000 + 3 000 = 6 000**

HOUSEHOLDS  
REGISTERED FOR FOOD AID  
ON DSD SYSTEM

MORE HOUSEHOLDS IN NEED OF  
FOOD AID IDENTIFIED DURING  
HOME VISITS

HOUSEHOLDS  
NEED MONTHLY  
FOOD AID

## Psychological sensitivities – hidden shame

Several interviews suggest that the reason so many needy people were not registered on the Department of Social Development’s system is because of the social stigma attached to being seen standing in line at a soup kitchen. There are deeply sensitive issues around a person’s dignity and social standing in a community, which also contribute to reticence in demanding food aid.

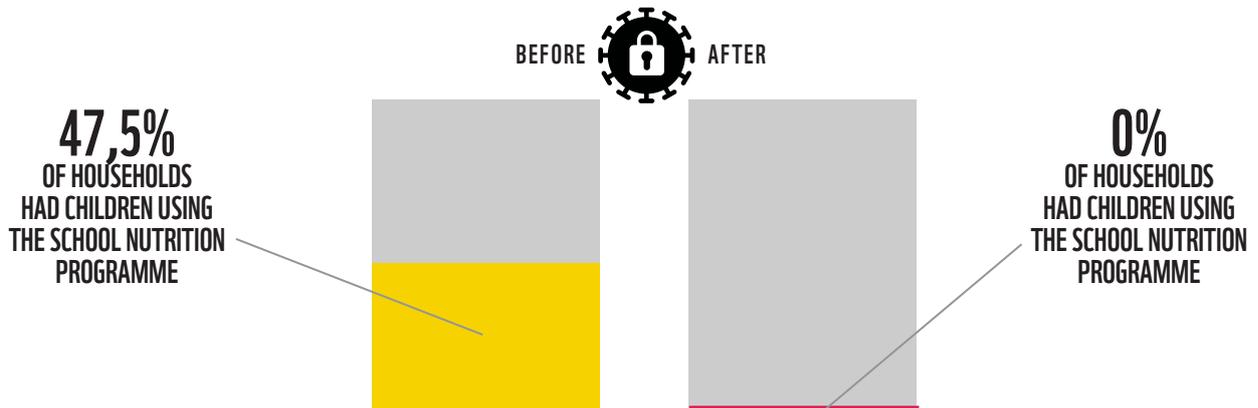
# CHILD HUNGER - WHERE IS THE NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMME?

The closing of schools has exposed the high levels of dependence on the National School Nutrition Programme. Not only have participating children been denied the one nutritious meal per day that they were guaranteed to receive, but their families have effectively been forced to endure the additional cost of replacing that meal, increasing the already severe pressure on household food budgets.

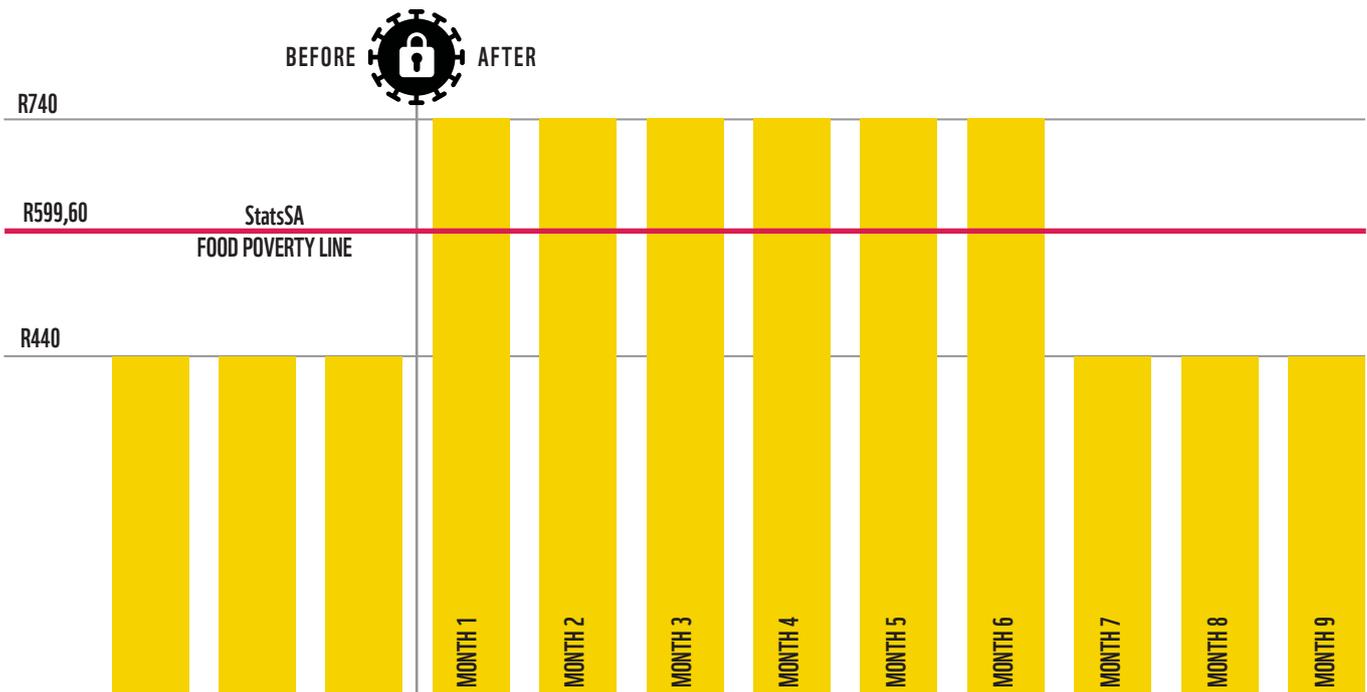
Of the households surveyed, 57 (47,5%) reported that one or more children (118 children in total) had been part of the National School Nutrition Programme prior to the lockdown.

With the resumption of the programme possibly some way off, “food poor” households with qualifying children may need to be prioritised for food aid.

Referenced against the StatsSA Food Poverty Line measure of R599,60 as the minimum food spend per person per month needed to guarantee human health, the adequacy of the pre-lockdown child support grant of R440 is thrown into question as a way to resolve child hunger. This grant was increased after lockdown to R740 per child but the increase will not be sustained after the additional support period of six months.



## CHILD SOCIAL GRANTS - BEFORE LOCKDOWN, WITH TEMPORARY SIX-MONTH INCREASE AND AFTER (PER MONTH PER CHILD)



# IMPROVING RESILIENCE - GROW YOUR OWN?

Only 5% of households reported growing food for own consumption on an average plot of 3 square metres. Only half of them (3 households) produced a surplus that was given to neighbours or family living elsewhere.

Reportedly there is no culture of home food gardens nor much understanding of the potential food cost savings or nutritional benefits that could be achieved. Growing food is considered a rural occupation and is not common practice for urban dwellers in Postmasburg.

Most people believe their spaces are too small to cultivate food and are concerned about the cost of water for plants when they struggle to afford it for drinking and washing. People state that they do not have any knowledge at all about growing food although several shared their interest in working for some level of food sufficiency after the experience of lockdown.

***“Hardly any food is growing at home as yards are generally very small, there is no access to seeds, and no education to use the land for growing.”***

The climate is harsh, with extreme temperatures and soil that is generally arid and poor. Conditions are simply not favourable for any growing of food, according to one respondent:

***“Our yard is small, so we cannot have a decent place to start a food garden, and the weather patterns change a lot, and most do not have experience on which seeds to plant during the different seasons.”***

The schools used to have food gardens as part of the curriculum. These gardens contributed to the school feeding schemes but are no longer active, with vandalism reported as the main deterrent.

# SUMMARY

The snapshot survey suggests that most households in Postmasburg have been negatively affected by the lockdown in terms of their food security. Even before lockdown Postmasburg was food stressed, with relatively higher dependencies on a few jobs and a greater-than-average proportion of young people.

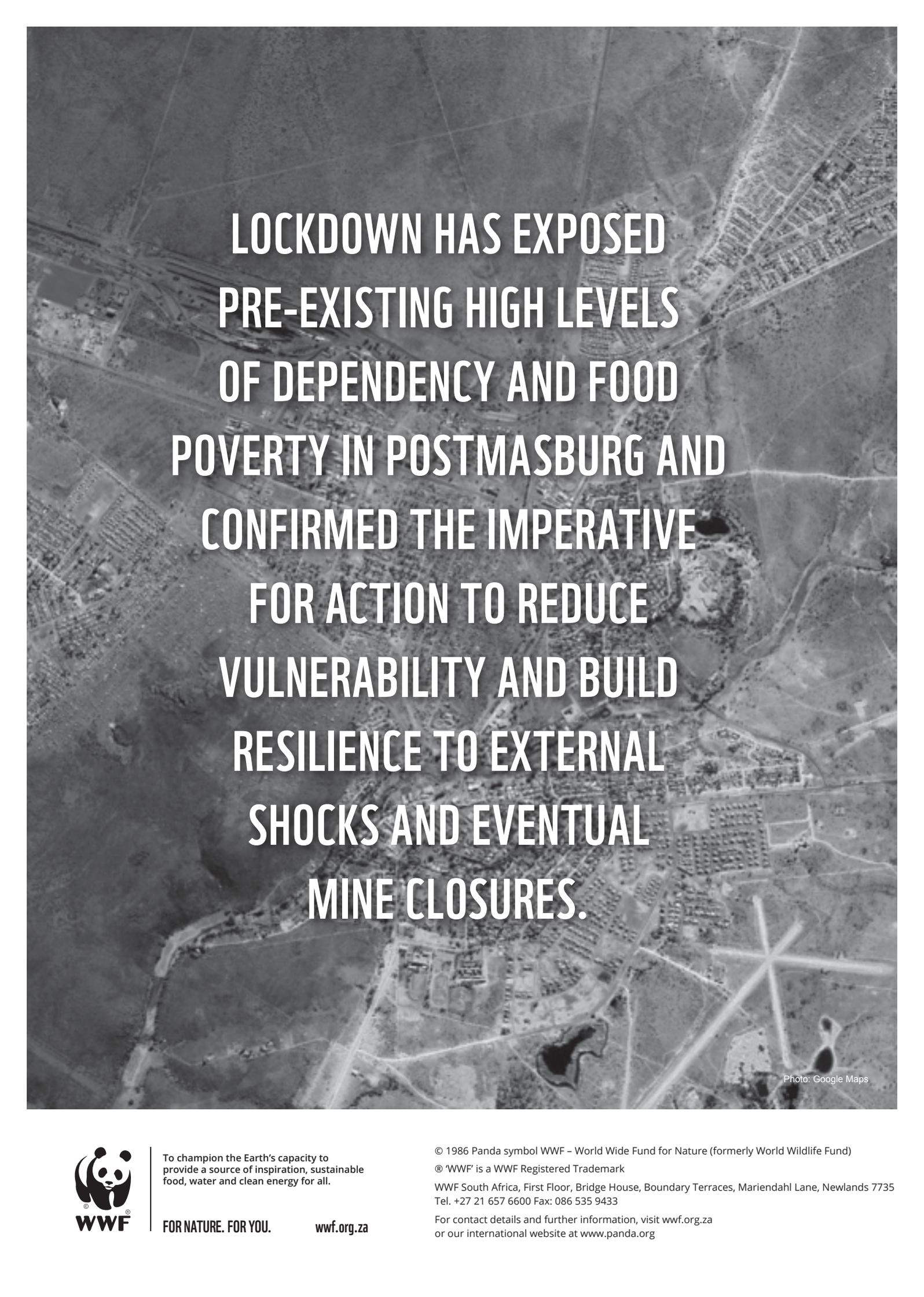
Those families where breadwinners have been able to continue in employment are managing to make ends meet, but with increased difficulty. Households headed by unemployed people and those who survive on grants struggle to cope with increased food poverty. Many are experiencing hunger and it is a struggle to survive.

Despite a coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the distribution of food aid has been clouded by uncertainty regarding qualifying criteria, allegations of impropriety and a lack of confidence about future access to food parcels. Temporary increases in social grants may have provided a buffer against hunger, but if grants return to pre-lockdown levels due to fiscal constraints, there may be severe repercussions.

This snapshot food security survey may help leadership groupings in the Tsantsabane Local Municipality to recognise the severity of the situation in the district and respond to it in a coordinated fashion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders who have often been guilty of talking past one another have collaborated in a coordinated way on both health matters and food aid. Arguably the time is right to seek a new social compact that prioritises reducing household food insecurity and vulnerability to multi-dimensional poverty.

Building on some of the proposals that emerged from MD360's consultations over the nine months prior to lockdown, measures to improve food security should also emphasise civic initiatives that strengthen community organisation. If leading actors in the Postmasburg community choose to support these initiatives along with increased inter-sectoral collaboration, then food security can be strengthened and livelihoods enhanced.

A series of recommendations for immediate actions and longer-term activities that would support a strategic approach to reduce vulnerability and build resilience is shared in the full report (which will be made available at [miningdialogues360.co.za](http://miningdialogues360.co.za) upon completion).

An aerial, grayscale photograph of a town, likely Postmasburg, showing a grid-like street pattern and some industrial or mining infrastructure. The terrain is hilly and appears arid. The text is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

**LOCKDOWN HAS EXPOSED  
PRE-EXISTING HIGH LEVELS  
OF DEPENDENCY AND FOOD  
POVERTY IN POSTMASBURG AND  
CONFIRMED THE IMPERATIVE  
FOR ACTION TO REDUCE  
VULNERABILITY AND BUILD  
RESILIENCE TO EXTERNAL  
SHOCKS AND EVENTUAL  
MINE CLOSURES.**

Photo: Google Maps



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