



*Postal Address:*

*POSTNET Suite 41, Private Bag X8, Cascades, Pietermaritzburg, 3202*

*Telephone: 031-261 2259*

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**South African Human Rights Commission**  
**The National Investigative Hearing into the Food System of South Africa**  
Sentinel House, Sunnyside Office Park,  
32 Princess of Wales Terrace,  
Johannesburg.

**EMAIL:** [foodinquiry@sahrc.org.za](mailto:foodinquiry@sahrc.org.za)

**RE: *Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity Group Submission: The impact of food price inflation, low wages, and essential service costs on the constitutional right to access sufficient food.***

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This submission presents evidence that sustained food price inflation between 2021 and early 2026, combined with low wages and rising essential service costs, has significantly undermined the ability of low-income households in South Africa to realise the constitutional right to have access to sufficient food.

Drawing on research from the Household Affordability Index compiled by the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD), the submission demonstrates that the cost of a basic household food basket has risen substantially during this period while wage growth and social protection measures have not kept pace with the rising cost of living.

The evidence indicates that households reliant on the national minimum wage and social grants, including the Child Support Grant, are structurally unable to afford adequate nutrition once unavoidable household expenses such as electricity and transport are

paid. In practice, many households must reduce dietary diversity, rely increasingly on cheaper calorie-dense foods, and incur debt to secure basic meals.

This situation reflects not merely a temporary inflationary shock but a persistent and systemic affordability crisis. Sustained gaps between household income and the cost of food have intensified hunger, increased the risk of child malnutrition, and deepened financial stress among low-income households.

These outcomes raise serious concerns regarding the State's obligations under Sections 27 and 28 of the Constitution, which guarantee the right to access sufficient food and the right of children to basic nutrition.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past five years South Africa has experienced a sustained increase in the cost of food, occurring alongside rising electricity tariffs and transport costs. For low-income households these pressures have unfolded within a broader context of limited wage growth, persistent unemployment, and high levels of poverty.

This submission examines how these intersecting pressures have affected household food affordability. The analysis draws on affordability data covering the period from January 2021 to January 2026, including household food basket prices, child nutrition costs, wage benchmarks, electricity tariffs, transport costs, and poverty thresholds. Taken together, these indicators provide a detailed picture of the real cost of survival faced by poor and working households.

A particularly important source of evidence is the Household Affordability Index (HAI) produced by the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group. The HAI tracks the prices of 44 essential food items commonly purchased by low-income households. Prices are collected monthly from supermarkets and butcheries located in low-income urban areas across Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, Springbok, and Pietermaritzburg.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike national consumer price indices, which include a wide range of goods and services across income groups, the HAI focuses specifically on the foods that form the basis of household diets in low-income communities. As such, it provides an important lens through which to understand the lived experience of food inflation among vulnerable households.

The evidence presented in this submission suggests that for a growing proportion of households, food has become effectively inaccessible once unavoidable household costs are met. Where large numbers of households are persistently unable to afford

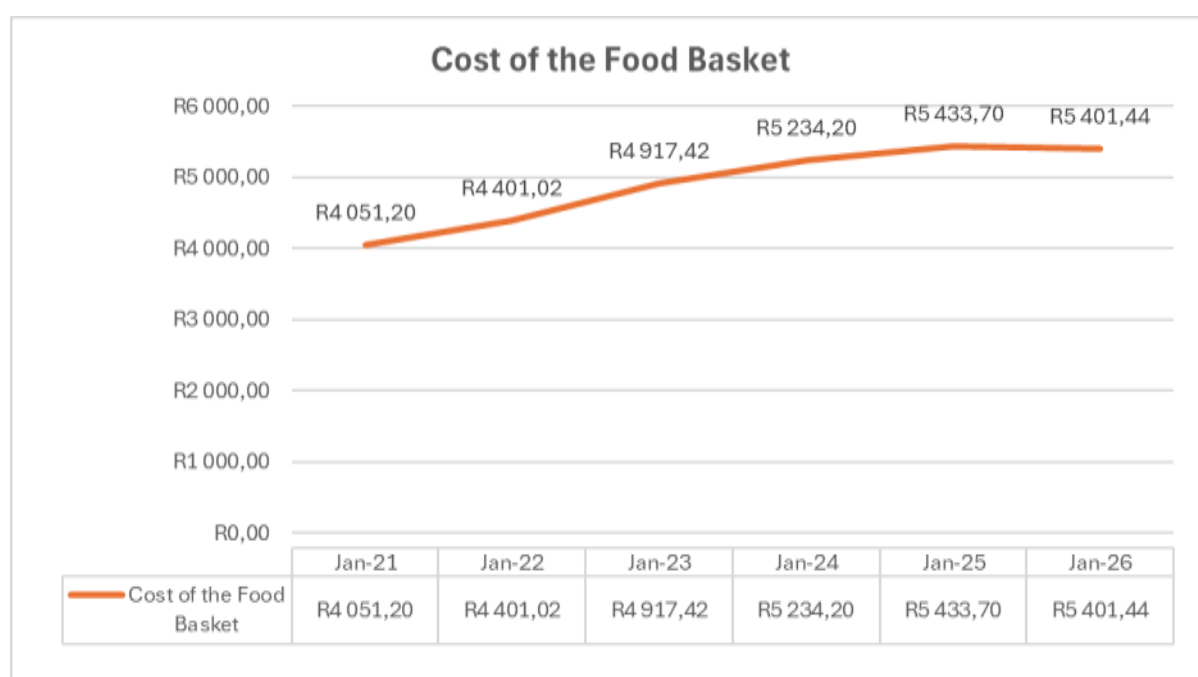
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<sup>1</sup> See PMBEJD Household Affordability Index at [www.pmbejd.org.za](http://www.pmbejd.org.za)

sufficient food despite employment or receipt of social assistance, this represents a systemic affordability failure with direct human rights implications.

## PRICE TRENDS AND HOUSEHOLD FOOD AFFORDABILITY

The data compiled by the Household Affordability Index reveals a sustained upward trend in the cost of essential foods between 2021 and 2026. The cost of the basic household food basket increased from approximately R4 051 in January 2021 to around R5 401 by January 2026, representing an increase of roughly 33 percent in nominal terms over five years.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1: Cost of the Household Food Basket, January 2021–January 2026**

Although food inflation moderated during certain periods after 2023, price levels remained permanently higher. For households already allocating a large share of income to food purchases, this cumulative increase translated directly into reduced affordability and increased vulnerability to hunger.

The burden of rising food prices is particularly severe for low-income households because food expenditure accounts for a disproportionately large share of their budgets. Estimates suggest that poor households typically spend between 40 and 60 percent of their income on food.<sup>3</sup> In situations of extreme poverty this proportion can be even higher.

<sup>2</sup> Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD), *Household Affordability Index Reports, 2021–2026* at [www.pmbejd.org.za](http://www.pmbejd.org.za)

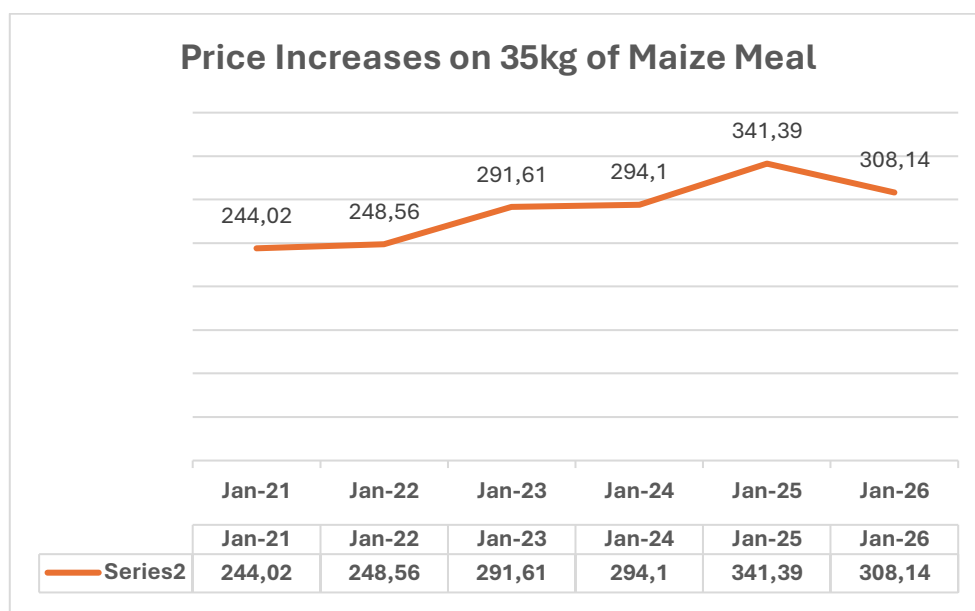
<sup>3</sup> Statistics South Africa, *Living Conditions Survey* and related consumption data.

The structure of the household food basket further intensifies the impact of inflation. A relatively small number of core staple foods account for the majority of household food expenditure. These include maize meal, rice, flour, sugar, beans, cooking oil, bread, eggs, milk, vegetables such as onions and cabbage, and basic animal proteins such as chicken.

The Household Affordability Index indicates that these core staple items account for approximately 53 percent of the total basket cost. Because these foods form the foundation of most meals, price increases in staples have a particularly severe impact on household food security.

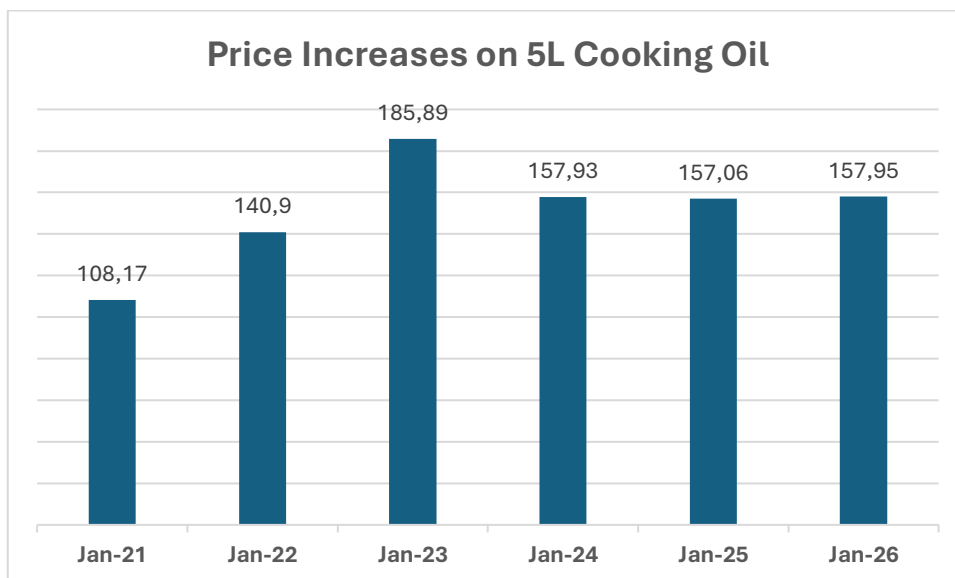
Across the period from 2020 to 2026, several key staples recorded substantial and sustained price increases.

Maize meal, which remains the primary staple carbohydrate for many low-income households, experienced one of the largest increases, rising by approximately 40 to 50 percent across the period.

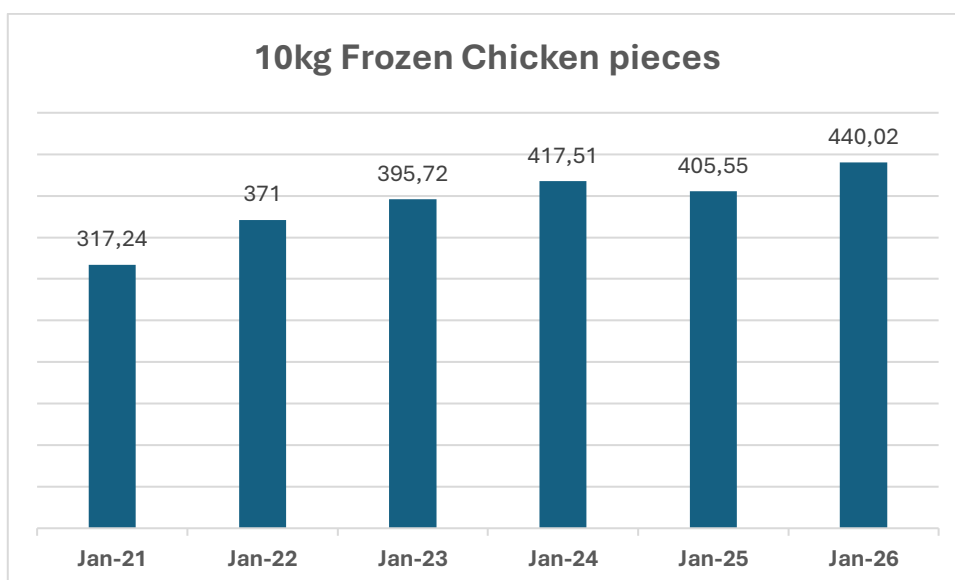


Sugar beans, a key source of affordable plant protein, also increased significantly, with cumulative price increases estimated between 35 and 45 percent.

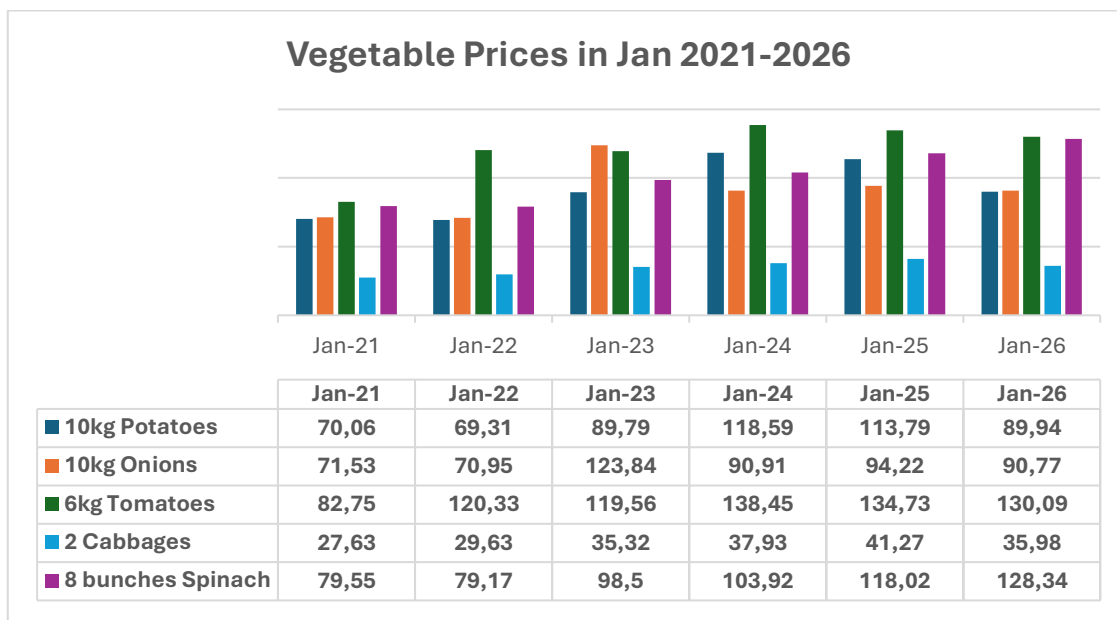
Cooking oil recorded particularly sharp inflation during the global vegetable oil crisis between 2021 and 2023, reflecting disruptions to global sunflower oil supplies and rising transport costs.



Chicken, the most accessible form of animal protein in many low-income households, also increased substantially due to higher feed prices, electricity costs, and processing expenses.



Vegetables, while not always displaying the same long-term upward trajectory as staples, have shown considerable short-term price volatility. In some months prices for items such as carrots, onions, cabbage, and butternut increased by as much as 15 percent. Such volatility creates additional uncertainty for households managing extremely constrained budgets.



Because staple foods must be purchased first to prevent hunger, increases in their prices reduce the funds available for nutrient-dense foods such as dairy products, fruit, and vegetables. Rising staple prices therefore not only increase the risk of hunger but also contribute to declining dietary quality.

## THE GAP BETWEEN AFFORDABLE FOOD AND ADEQUATE NUTRITION

One of the most significant insights generated by the Household Affordability Index is the growing gap between the cost of the basic household food basket and the cost of a nutritionally adequate diet.

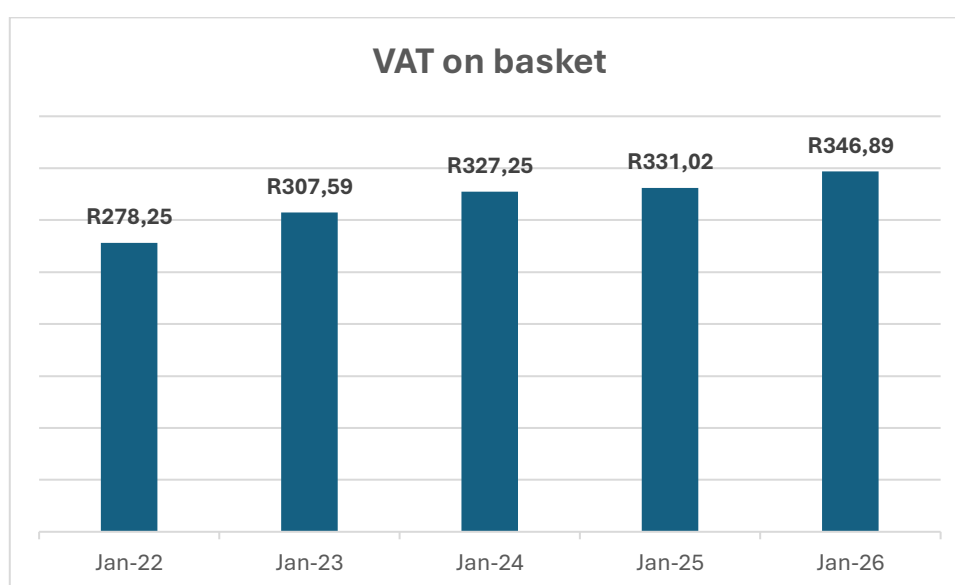
The household food basket represents the foods that families typically purchase under conditions of constrained budgets. By contrast, the Basic Nutritional Food Basket estimates the cost of meeting the minimum dietary requirements necessary for adequate nutrition.

By February 2026 the household food basket cost approximately R5 383 per month, while the cost of the basic nutritional basket was estimated at around R6 460. This represents a nutrition affordability gap of approximately R1 076 per month.<sup>i</sup>

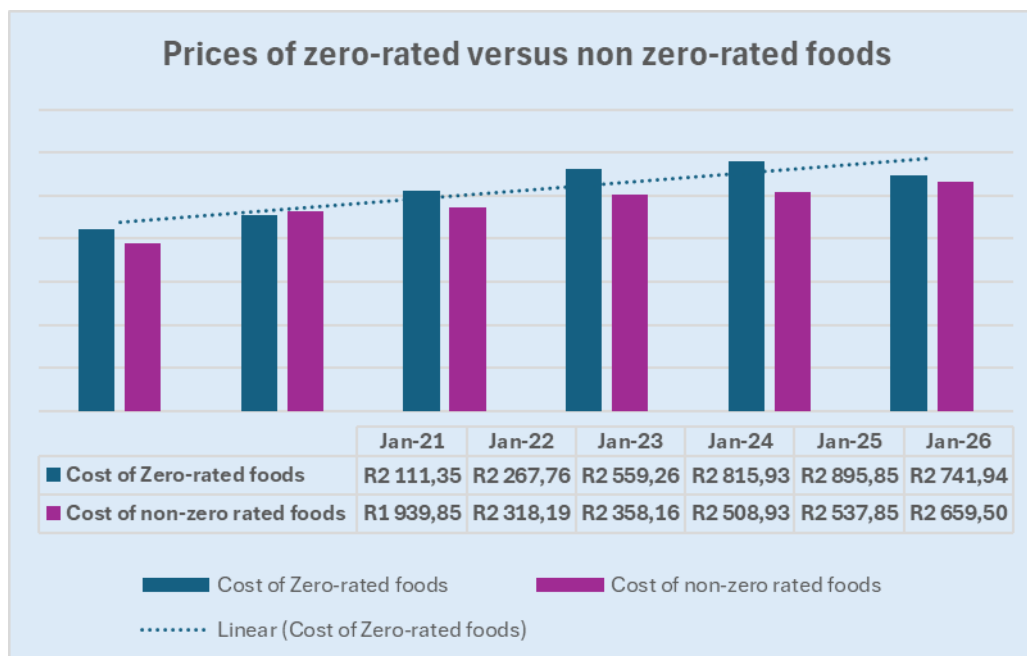
The existence of this gap indicates that many households are unable to afford a nutritionally adequate diet even when purchasing the cheapest available foods. In practice, this means that households often prioritise calories over dietary diversity, increasing their reliance on inexpensive starches while reducing consumption of protein, fruit, and vegetables.

## VALUE ADDED TAX, ZERO-RATED FOODS, AND STRUCTURAL FOOD COSTS

South Africa's VAT zero-rating policy is intended to reduce the cost of certain basic food items for consumers. Twenty-two of the forty-four foods (50%) in the total household food basket are subject to VAT. VAT on the total household food basket came to R346,89 in January 2026. This means 6,4% of the household food basket is made up of VAT which is more than the cost of an average low-income household's requirement of 30kg maize meal per month (in January 2026, 30kg maize meal cost R308,14). The total Rand-value of VAT on basic food stuffs is very high and removes money from the purse that could be spent on more food.



However, evidence from the Household Affordability Index also suggests that while zero-rating provides some relief, it has not been sufficient to offset the broader drivers of food price inflation. Between 2021 and 2026 the cost of zero-rated foods in the household basket increased from approximately R2 111 to R2 742, while the cost of non-zero-rated foods rose from about R1 940 to R2 660.



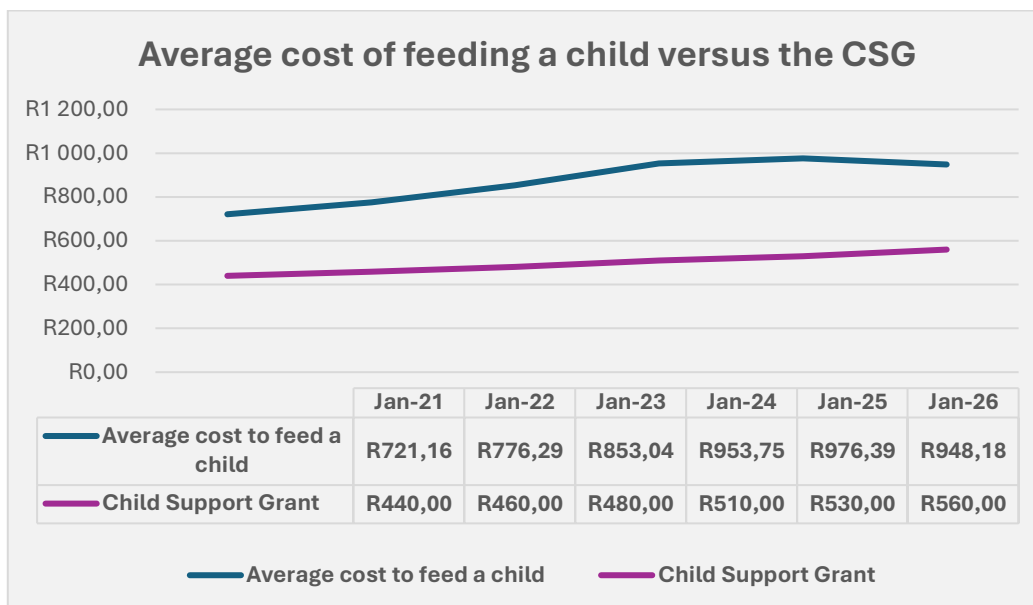
**Zero-Rated and Non-Zero-Rated Food Costs, 2021–2026**

These trends indicate that the main drivers of rising food costs lie not only in taxation but also in supply-chain dynamics, energy prices, transport costs, and the structure of food retail markets.

## CHILD NUTRITION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

The effects of rising food prices are particularly severe for children, whose nutritional needs are critical for healthy growth and development.

By January 2026 the average monthly cost of feeding a child was estimated at approximately R948. Over the same period, the Child Support Grant stood at R560 per month. This represents a shortfall of approximately R388 per child each month.



**Cost to Feed a Child vs Child Support Grant, 2021–2026**

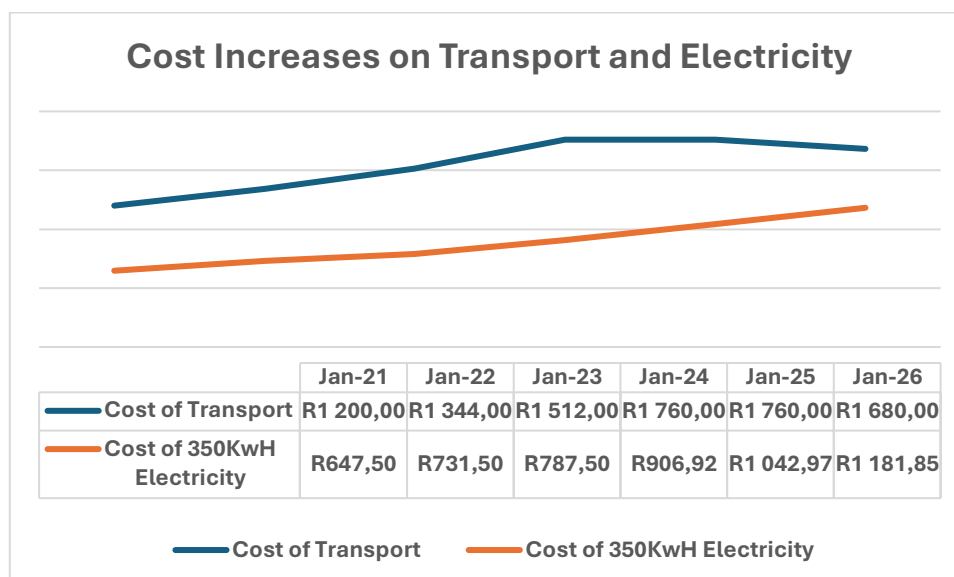
This gap indicates that current social protection measures are insufficient to secure basic child nutrition. In a country where child stunting affects approximately 27 percent of children, such gaps raise serious concerns regarding long-term public health and developmental outcomes.

## **WAGES, ESSENTIAL COSTS, AND FOOD POVERTY**

While the national minimum wage has increased over time, rising essential costs absorb much of this income before households are able to purchase food.

By January 2026 the national minimum wage provided an income of approximately R4 387 per month. However, average monthly transport costs were estimated at around R1 680, while pre-paid electricity costs for a modest level of household consumption were approximately R1 182. After paying these unavoidable expenses, only around R1 875 remains available for food and other household necessities.

When distributed across a four-person household this leaves roughly R469 per person per month, significantly below the official food poverty line of R777.



This evidence illustrates a structural mismatch between wages and the cost of basic survival, meaning that employment does not necessarily protect households from hunger.

## **STRUCTURAL FOOD AFFORDABILITY FAILURE AND ITS SOCIAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL CONSEQUENCES**

The evidence presented in this submission points to a persistent and measurable gap between the cost of basic food consumption and the income available to low-income households. When assessed over time, this gap demonstrates that food insecurity in South Africa is not simply the result of temporary market fluctuations or short-term economic shocks. Rather, it reflects a structural affordability failure in which the interaction of sustained food price inflation, low wages, and rising essential service costs consistently leaves a substantial proportion of households unable to access sufficient and nutritious food.

The Household Affordability Index provides a particularly important evidentiary basis for assessing these dynamics. By measuring the actual retail prices paid by low-income consumers for essential foods, the index offers a more accurate picture of the cost pressures faced by vulnerable households than broader consumer price indicators. When these price trends are analysed alongside wage data, social protection levels, and national poverty thresholds, they provide a clear indication of whether households possess the economic means to secure adequate nutrition.

Three indicators are particularly relevant for assessing the realisation of the right to food. The first is the relationship between the cost of the household food basket and the income available to households. The second concerns the relationship between the cost of child nutrition and the level of social protection provided through measures such as the Child Support Grant. The third relates to the proportion of household income absorbed by unavoidable non-food expenses, particularly electricity and transport

costs. Across each of these indicators the evidence demonstrates a sustained deterioration in food affordability between 2021 and 2026.

Over this period the cost of the household food basket increased significantly while wage growth remained modest. As illustrated above, the price of the basic food basket rose by approximately one third over five years. By contrast, income growth among low-wage workers did not increase at a comparable rate. As a result, a growing share of household income is required to secure the same basic foods.

At the same time, the cost of providing basic nutrition for children now substantially exceeds the value of the Child Support Grant. The widening gap between these two indicators indicates that the current social protection framework does not provide sufficient resources to secure children's basic nutritional needs. In addition, rising electricity and transport costs absorb an increasing share of household income before food purchases can be made. Once these unavoidable expenses are deducted from minimum wage earnings, the income remaining for food often falls below the national food poverty line.

Taken together, these indicators provide strong empirical evidence that a substantial number of households lack the economic means necessary to secure sufficient food. The consequences of this affordability gap are visible in a range of social and developmental outcomes.

Households frequently respond to rising food costs by downgrading the quality and diversity of their diets. To ensure that basic calorie needs are met, families often shift toward cheaper staple foods while reducing consumption of fruit, vegetables, dairy products, and protein. This pattern of dietary compromise increases the risk of micronutrient deficiencies and other adverse health outcomes.

Child nutrition is particularly vulnerable to these dynamics. Insufficient dietary diversity during early childhood is strongly associated with stunting and impaired cognitive development, both of which carry long-term implications for educational attainment, labour market participation, and overall economic productivity.

At the household level, the financial pressures associated with rising food prices also contribute to growing levels of economic stress. Families frequently cope by reducing portion sizes, skipping meals, or borrowing money to purchase food. Such coping strategies can deepen household indebtedness and increase vulnerability to future shocks.

These patterns are reflected in national survey data indicating that between 20 and 25 percent of households experience hunger, while food insecurity affects approximately 30 percent of low-income households. Despite South Africa producing sufficient food at the national level, access to food remains deeply unequal, with affordability emerging as the central barrier for many households.

The evidence therefore suggests that rising food prices, when combined with constrained incomes and increasing essential service costs, are producing a sustained erosion of household food security. Addressing this structural affordability gap is essential not only for reducing hunger but also for protecting public health, supporting child development, and advancing broader social and economic wellbeing.

## **THE AFFORDABILITY CRISIS AS GENDERED VIOLENCE**

Affordability is experienced through gendered power relations. Our research repeatedly demonstrated that women absorb the shocks of income insufficiency. Women reduce their own consumption first, manage debt, negotiate with creditors, and carry the emotional burden of explaining scarcity to children. The inability to afford food constitutes a form of structural violence. Patriarchal norms position women as caregivers responsible for household well-being, yet economic systems deny them sufficient resources. A gendered lens is therefore critical as we assess the cost-of-living crisis for it is a structural determinant of how economic crises are lived and navigated.

## **CONSTITUTIONAL OBLIGATIONS AND THE REALISATION OF THE RIGHT TO FOOD**

Section 27(1)(b) of the Constitution guarantees everyone the right to have access to sufficient food, while Section 27(2) requires the State to take reasonable legislative and other measures, within available resources, to progressively realise this right. The Constitutional Court has clarified that the reasonableness of such measures must be assessed not only in terms of their formal design but also in terms of their practical impact, particularly for those most vulnerable to deprivation. Where policies exist in principle but fail to prevent persistent or worsening deprivation among vulnerable groups, this raises important questions regarding their adequacy and effectiveness.

The evidence presented in this submission suggests that existing policy measures have not prevented a sustained erosion of food affordability among low-income households. Persistent food insecurity among both employed workers and households dependent on social grants indicates that current policy responses may not meet the constitutional standard of reasonableness when assessed in terms of their outcomes. While a range of interventions are in place, including social protection programmes, wage regulation mechanisms, and measures intended to mitigate food price pressures, the available data demonstrates that these interventions have not been sufficient to ensure that low-income households are able to secure adequate nutrition.

Several areas of policy effectiveness warrant closer scrutiny in this regard. First, the adequacy of income floors, including both the national minimum wage and key social assistance grants, appears insufficient when assessed against the actual cost of food and essential household expenditures. Evidence presented earlier in this submission indicates that once unavoidable costs such as electricity and transport are paid, the income available to many households falls well below the level required to meet basic

food needs. Second, current policy frameworks do not consistently integrate food affordability considerations with the rising costs of essential services such as electricity and transport, despite the significant role these expenses play in reducing household purchasing power. Third, existing mechanisms for monitoring food pricing and food value chains may not adequately address structural drivers of inflation in staple food markets, including supply chain costs, market concentration, and pricing dynamics across retail sectors. Taken together, these issues suggest the need for a more integrated policy framework that recognises the multiple economic factors shaping household access to food.

The Constitution also accords children heightened protection through Section 28(1)(c), which guarantees every child the right to basic nutrition. Unlike many socio-economic rights, this obligation is generally understood to be immediate rather than subject to progressive realisation. The evidence presented in this submission indicates that the value of the Child Support Grant falls substantially below the estimated cost required to provide basic nutrition for a child. The widening gap between the cost of child nutrition and the value of the grant therefore raises serious concerns regarding the practical realisation of this constitutional right.

Where reliable evidence demonstrates that existing social assistance measures are insufficient to meet the minimum nutritional needs of children, the persistence of this gap raises important questions regarding the adequacy of current policy arrangements. Given the well-established long-term developmental consequences of early childhood malnutrition, including stunting, impaired cognitive development, and adverse health outcomes, addressing this shortfall should be regarded as an urgent policy priority. Ensuring that social protection measures are aligned with the real cost of basic nutrition is therefore essential to fulfilling the State's constitutional obligations toward children and to safeguarding their long-term wellbeing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RIGHTS REALISATION

The evidence presented in this submission indicates that the current food affordability crisis affecting low-income households in South Africa cannot be addressed through isolated or narrowly targeted interventions. Rather, the problem reflects the cumulative and interacting effects of sustained food price inflation, inadequate income levels, and rising essential service costs that collectively constrain the ability of households to secure sufficient and nutritious food. A meaningful policy response must therefore adopt a coordinated and rights-based approach that addresses both the income constraints faced by households and the structural drivers of food costs.

- At the most **immediate level, the adequacy of household income floors must be assessed in relation to the real cost of a nutritionally adequate diet.** Evidence presented in this submission demonstrates that both the national minimum wage and key social assistance measures fall short of enabling low-income households to secure sufficient food once essential expenses are paid. Ensuring the effective realisation of the right to access sufficient food therefore

requires a systematic review of the relationship between wages, social grants, and the actual cost of meeting basic nutritional needs. **Attention should be given to the value of the Child Support Grant, which currently falls substantially below the estimated cost of feeding a child each month.** Aligning the grant more closely with the real cost of basic child nutrition would represent a critical step toward fulfilling the constitutional obligation to guarantee every child the right to basic nutrition.

- **Beyond income support, social protection policies should more explicitly incorporate nutrition objectives.** Strengthening nutrition-sensitive social protection, through measures such as increased child nutrition support, expanded school feeding programmes, and targeted food transfers, can play an important role in protecting vulnerable households from the effects of rising food prices while improving dietary quality and child development outcomes.
- At the same time, **addressing food insecurity requires recognition of the significant impact of non-food household costs on food affordability.** Evidence shows that electricity and transport expenses absorb a substantial share of low-income household budgets, reducing the disposable income available for food purchases. **Policy frameworks addressing energy pricing, public transport affordability, and basic service costs should therefore explicitly consider their implications for household food security.** Integrating food affordability considerations into these policy areas would better reflect the interconnected nature of household expenditure pressures.
- **Structural drivers of food prices must also be addressed.** Strengthened monitoring and oversight of food value chains may help identify factors contributing to persistent increases in staple food prices, including supply chain costs, market concentration, and retail pricing practices.
- **Expanding the list of VAT zero-rated food items could provide additional targeted relief for low-income consumers,** particularly if focused on staple foods and nutrient-dense products that form the basis of affordable household diets.
- Finally, longer-term strategies aimed at strengthening the resilience of South Africa's food system should form part of a comprehensive response. Supporting smallholder farmers, expanding urban and community-based food production, improving market access for local producers, and encouraging shorter food supply chains can contribute to greater stability in food supply while improving access to affordable food in vulnerable communities.

Taken together, these measures underscore the need for an integrated policy approach that addresses both the immediate income constraints faced by households and the broader structural dynamics shaping food affordability. Such an approach is essential to ensure that policy responses can protect vulnerable households from persistent food

price pressures while advancing the progressive realisation of the constitutional right to access sufficient and nutritious food.

## CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this submission demonstrates a sustained and measurable gap between the cost of food and the income available to low-income households in South Africa.

This gap has persisted over several years and is reflected in multiple indicators, including rising household food basket costs, the growing disparity between child nutrition costs and the Child Support Grant, and the limited disposable income available to minimum wage earners after essential expenses are paid.

Taken together, these indicators suggest that existing policy measures have not been sufficient to prevent the erosion of household food affordability. Although inflation has moderated in recent periods, food prices remain structurally elevated while wages and social grants have not kept pace with the rising cost of living. As a result, many households are unable to afford a nutritionally adequate diet. Without coordinated policy intervention, these trends are likely to deepen existing inequalities in food access and nutrition.

Given the constitutional importance of the right to access sufficient food and the immediate right of children to basic nutrition, these trends warrant scrutiny. Ensuring the affordability of sufficient and nutritious food is therefore not only a matter of economic policy but also a constitutional obligation. The evidence provides a strong basis for the South African Human Rights Commission to examine whether current policy frameworks adequately protect the realisation of these rights, particularly for households most vulnerable to food insecurity.

Yours faithfully,



Mervyn Abrahams  
Programme Coordinator  
Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity Group  
Email: [mervyn@pmbejd.org.za](mailto:mervyn@pmbejd.org.za)  
Mobile: 079 398 9384  
Website: [www.pmbejd.org.za](http://www.pmbejd.org.za)

