

Cash-poor SAA can start by ditching those gravy plane flights

FORGET about the cryptic Nostradamus if you want to decry the shape of the future in the utterances of the past.

Look rather at an unknown medieval English riddler who with uncanny foresight predicted the excesses almost 400 years later of the South African government.

The riddle is about a man with four wives on a journey to Nkandla, KwaZulu-Natal. Well, not exactly. That's taking prophetic licence. It's actually about a man with seven wives on a journey to St Ives, Cornwall.

It goes: As I was going to St Ives/ I met a man with seven wives/ Each wife had seven sacks/ Each sack had seven cats/ Each cat had seven kits/ Kits, cats, sacks, and wives/ How many were there going to St Ives?

Arithmetically, there are a number of possible answers, but in a South African context the best



WILLIAM SAUNDERSON-MEYER

Jaundiced Eye

answer is one of political philosophy. It is, far too many. Especially when they are not walking but flying SAA and the taxpayer is paying.

In case you hadn't noticed, the national airline is in trouble. At a long-delayed annual general meeting it last month revealed that its annual loss had doubled to R2.6bn and that it is "technically bankrupt".

To remedy this, Nico Bezuidenhout, SAA's acting chief executive,

launched a "90-day action plan", ending on March 31, which will supposedly "steer SAA back to full implementation of its long term turnaround strategy". So basically, when you cut through the gumph, it's clear the SAA management plane drifted so far off course that it had to fly for three months to get back to the take-off point.

Bezuidenhout took one hard decision that saves R600 million a year.

He closed the loss-making direct flights to Beijing and Mumbai. These routes were opened not because of commercial viability but as an act of pandering symbolism upon South Africa's accession to the Brics (Brazil, Russia, India and China) group of emerging economies.

Other SAA stringency measures, however, have a faint air of desperation. Last week the airline dumped all the magazines, used blankets, toiletries and leftover food from an A340-600 aircraft returning from Munich, to reduce extra weight and cut fuel costs.

It makes sense to cut weight. But SAA shouldn't be dumping ephemera; it should rather ditch the corpulent free-riders.

Our parliamentarians, numbering 490, are each entitled to 84 domestic economy-class tickets a

year for themselves and their spouses, as well as 12 for each kid. Conservatively, that's around 47 000 seats removed from the revenue equation, or the equivalent of SAA's 12 Airbus A320-232s, which carry 138 passengers, each undertaking 340 free flights a year.

The break-even on a domestic ticket – where SAA incurs its biggest losses – is R1 700. So these slipstreaming public representative are punching at least an R80m hole in the South African fiscus, because it is the taxpayer who ultimately reimburses SAA – or any other airline that they travel on – for the cost of their tickets.

Then there are the ministers and their deputies, of which there are 74 at most recent count, and their cost-tailing entourages. Because the ministerial handbook outlining conditions of service is considered

top-secret – presumably on the grounds that it would blow up in the government's face were we to fully comprehend the lotus life of our leaders – one has to work with the 2007 version, which the Mail&Guardian managed to unearth.

According to this, our ethereal ministerials are each annually entitled to 74 free business-class tickets. I was unable to establish whether they also get their 84 economy-class parliamentary tickets.

Each kid at school or in tertiary education gets six free flights a year. There are another eight tickets each, for to-ing and fro-ing between place of education and Parliament or the ministerial permanent residence. Also, during the parliamentary session, each dependent gets another ticket to visit the folks.

The children can, "if they cannot

remain at home", along with spouses, accompany cabinet members on any "official" trip – one that involves ministerial business of any kind. That's true also of international trips, although spouses must pay for themselves on these.

Again, working conservatively with two kittens per cabinet member, it means that around 11 000 business class seats, at about R4 000 a seat, amounting to around another R44m can be added to the hidden subsidy the taxpayer is making. Most of that would go to SAA, though some would go to other airlines.

Each year the gravy plane perks become more lavish and the potential for misuse is obvious. It's a profligacy that South Africa not only cannot afford, but also is obscene in a nation with so much poverty.

Follow WSM on Twitter @TheJaundicedEye

Meeting the needs of the hungry

HUNGER, Benjamin Franklin once observed, "never saw bad bread". And, perhaps like other homilies about food – doughty wisdoms such as "through hunger we recognise the value of food" – Franklin's 18th-century aphorism, typical of many in his long-running, best-selling pamphlet, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, has a lasting truth.

Yet, in a very different world of fast food and long, slow commutes, a complex globalised food industry, unprecedented urbanisation and an apparently unassailable capitalist rationale, "bad bread" is more than the mouldy crust it may have been two centuries ago, and "hunger" as it's commonly understood is not the sum of the problem.

On their own, food parcels, or backyard veggie gardens, are not an adequate response.

So argue Dr Jane Battersby and fellow researchers at UCT's African Centre for Cities whose detailed study for the City of Cape Town makes the case for a comprehensive, city-scaled response to a condition that exacerbates the metro's socio-economic challenges.

Food insecurity, they point out, goes beyond hunger in the conventional sense to encompass a diet that cannot sustain a healthy body and mind, and, by extension, a food system that cannot sustain a healthy, stable and developing city, or society.

Food insecure children cannot learn or concentrate at school, a food insecure workforce cannot advance, and the health-care, developmental, social and personal costs of this insufficiency are high.

The consequences range from malnutrition or susceptibility to ill-health, obesity and debilitating lifestyle diseases to economic dysfunction and social unrest. Improving the nutritional profile of the poor thus benefits everyone.

In an interview, Battersby said: "Food security can potentially cause chronic and immediate problems for urban areas – globally, we have seen food riots, for instance – and, in the long term, we know there are profound health and development implications.

"So how we are going to create conditions to enable people to access affordable, nutritious and socially acceptable foods?"

"This is where one has to move beyond providing food baskets and setting up food gardens and ask questions about what's driving the system.

"If food security is a concern for urban areas, we need to start thinking about systemic issues – how food retailing, in poorer areas especially, actually works and what interventions can be made to achieve improvements."

This is the gist of the UCT team's Food System and Food Security Study, submitted to the city on commission last July.

It is framed by Canadian food policy analyst Wayne Roberts's crisp assertion that "a city is what it eats", and is predicated on the idea that everything to do with how and what a city eats is the business of city policymakers.

The opening line of its executive summary explicitly acknowledges the significance of the city's commissioning the report in noting that "Cape Town is the first city in the southern African region to initiate a comprehensive food security study".

And it argues that Cape Town, by no means uniquely, has a problem: it is a city where "food insecurity manifests not just as hunger, but as long-term consumption of a limited variety of foods, reduction in meal sizes and choices to eat calorie-dense, nutritionally poor foods in an effort to get enough food to get by".

"The latest study of food insecurity in Cape Town found that 75 percent of households in sampled low-income areas were food insecure, with 58 percent falling into the severely food insecure category."

These conditions, the report says, are the result of household poverty, but also "wider structural issues" such as the food retail environment and the price and availability of healthy relative to less healthy foods.

What is needed, it advises, is a new approach founded on a "food system and food security strategy", which covers everything from urban agriculture policy, planning approvals and transport to health regulations and waste.

This requires a better understanding of how and what the city eats, and what interventions – regulations or incentives, for instance – can reshape patterns of food insecurity.

Cape Town is noted for its gastronomic finesse, fine dining and gourmet markets, yet more than three quarters of sampled low-income households are malnourished, writes Michael Morris



CITY DILEMMA: Food insecurity can potentially cause chronic and immediate problems like food riots, and in the long term there are profound health and development problems, says UCT researcher Dr Jane Battersby. PICTURE: MATTHEWS BALOYI

The report notes that the consolidation of food production (5 000 wheat farmers nationally, but just four millers controlling 87% of the market; or the 10 largest packaged-food companies accounting for 52% of packaged-food sales, for example) tends to generate high inflation, with a sharp impact on the poor.

Processed food is often cheaper, or quicker to make a meal from for commuting householders who arrive home late in the day.

Understanding what Battersby calls the "metabolism" of the food system in poor areas is essential to calculating effective interventions to ensure healthier eating.

As the report observes, low-income households depend on formal and informal retailers, both of

which have benefits and weaknesses regarding access to healthy, safe, and affordable food.

Where formal retailers offer lower prices per unit and have well-regulated safety standards, they retail in unit sizes unaffordable to the poorest, have limited opening hours and do not grant credit. Informal retailers are often more expensive per unit and lack safety standards, but sell in affordable unit sizes, are open longer hours and often offer credit.

Thus, the complexity of the food system calls for a "holistic" approach to better inform the city's longer-term responses.

"The scale of the challenge means that the response can no longer be ad hoc and

piecemeal projects."

The report recommends that the city should:

- Establish a food system and food security working group to develop coherent, effective strategies to address food insecurity and to work towards a pro-poor food system, build collaborative partnerships, and create a food system and food security charter to guide long-term planning.
- Reassess the Agricultural Land Review (particularly in the context of development encroachments on areas such as Phillippi and Joostenbergvlakte, warning that, once lost to farming, "they cannot be recovered").
- Develop a coherent, integrated position on food retailing. "At pres-

ent formal and informal food retail are not viewed as being part of a single food system... (and) decisions about retail development are made (without) consideration of food security impacts. Retail is the main food source for the urban poor (and) it is essential that it provides low-income households with access to affordable, nutritious, safe food."

● Incentivise food processing as a growth industry, particularly in the small and medium enterprise sector, not least to boost job creation.

● Advocate more pro-poor food price monitoring. "Only with better data on the impact of food prices on the poor will there be the political will to address the problem in national government."

The UCT report was "noted" at a

council meeting in December.

What does this mean in real terms?

Zara Nicholson, spokeswoman for Mayor Patricia de Lille, said while food policy was not a local government competence, "the city wanted to get a better understanding of the interdependencies and challenges in Cape Town's food system".

"This information can be drawn on to understand how the food system may be a factor in the city's planning... and where we will need to interact with other spheres of government while understanding what our programmes, such as food gardens in the Social Development Department, play in the overall food system."

Nicholson said the study "makes a number of observations which will be considered by the city's line departments as required", based on their "relevance for the city as an organisation".

Echoing to some extent the report's own call for deeper study, Nicholson said: "This study encountered challenges in collecting suitable data from food retailers, which meant that it had to rely on certain assumptions to draw conclusions."

Five years ago, at the plenary session on the final day of the World Economic Forum in Dar es Salaam, President Jacob Zuma argued uncontroversially that democracy must "improve the quality of life of ordinary people", adding, with what his opponents would doubtless consider an ironic metaphor: "You can't eat democracy."

Democracy, of course, is not for eating – though the phrase is well understood and is a common enough refrain, the token of an unsatisfied hanker, or a gnawing disillusionment in our post-liberation enterprise.

On the other hand, what democracy can do is enable people to change the way the greater food system is managed so that better nutrition and a healthier society are placed front and centre of policy initiatives.

And that, Battersby argues, is what cities, especially, can and ought to be looking at in a more executive-minded way.

The growing acknowledgement of the role of cities is underscored by the commissioning of a study by the SA Cities Network – a policy adviser to metros – on food insecurity across all nine metropolitan centres.

Food policy analysts insist, though, that a first step must be an at least partial devolution of a mandate for food security to cities.

As Battersby noted: "The absence of recognition of the urban within the new (national) policy means that we are unlikely to see the development of policies and strategies that can have an impact in urban areas."

And, with rising urbanisation, it's the cities that are hungriest.

It takes more than the threat of fire to make us all equal

ANN MIDDLETON sat at her piano on Noordhoek Common.

She and others, fearing the inferno in the mountains above their homes, fled with whatever they could carry. Ann took Saffron, her dog, and her musical instruments.

Later, as a new day emerged from the chaos of the night, she began to play on the piano. The music, with its snatches of Keith Jarrett-like chords, brought some comfort to her fellow refugees.

The wildfire of this past week left in its wake a tragic inventory of irreplaceable loss.



MICHAEL WEEDER

By the Way

Fran Collings, 82, was one of its victims. Her Tokai home burnt down. Many face unemployment as

their places of work have been affected, one way or the other, by the fire. Animals succumbed to the

smoke and flames.

The fire-fighters, including the volunteers who put in leave from their regular jobs, braved the heat and danger. Their commitment was epitomised by Samantha Alexander, a City of Cape Town fire-fighter.

This mother of a two-year-old held her own, her resolve evident in the way she strained her weight into the fire-hose draped around her shoulder, dragging it towards the fire flaring behind her.

Cape Town, as in times when shack-fires have rendered thousands homeless, responded with a gener-

ous gratitude in cash and kind.

The fire, we might say, renders all equal. But does it really, when we weigh up the capricious power of Mother Nature against the legacy of poverty?

Within the ranks of these workers who fought the flames, were those who carried the weight of the burden of forced removals.

They fought to protect the lives and property of those who, within the cruel arc of history, possessed their probable endowment.

One would not have to search long among their comrades to find

survivors of shack-fires.

Groot Constantia, remembered more as a celebrated wine estate and less for its place in our country's understated history of slavery, benefited from the vigilance and timely intervention of Iziko Museums.

A valued cargo of historic bedsteads, tables and bottles of wine was escorted by traffic officers into the city for safekeeping.

During a time of great persecution of Christians in Rome, Lawrence the deacon was instructed by the prefect of Rome to bring the treasures of the church to him.

After three days he assembled a large number of lame, blind, leprous, orphaned and widowed persons before the prefect and said: "These are the treasures of the church."

Eurecon Primary School in Connaught Road also had a fire in this week. Cape Town was silent. "What about us? Are we not newsworthy?" asked Jimmy Nagan, a former principal of the school.

All people are to be loved and things to be used. We must guard, cautions Goethe, against the immorality of loving things more than we do people.