

Newsletter #3— March 2025

Editorial

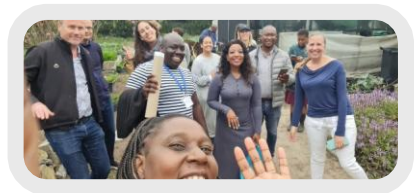
Dear Readers, we are delighted to present the third newsletter of the Food Environments in Africa – Addressing Malnutrition using a Syndemics Approach (FoodSAMSA) project. Now in its fourth and final year, the project aims to develop effective, evidence-based solutions to address the double burden of malnutrition in South Africa and beyond. The project is based on a strong partnership of four institutions: the University of Cape Town (UCT), South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa and LMU Munich in Germany. The project is generously funded by Germany's Federal Ministry of Food & Agriculture based on a decision by the Bundestag, Germany's parliament.

These are challenging times – both economically and politically, including in food and nutrition. As data published by the Global Burden of Disease Collaborators in *The Lancet* in early 2025 shows, the prevalence of obesity continues to increase globally, and particularly in middle-income countries, including South Africa. The authors estimated that by 2050, around 3.8 billion adults – more than half the global adult population – will have overweight or obesity. In the sub-Saharan Africa region, the number of adults living with overweight and obesity is projected to more than triple between 2021 -2050, whilst the prevalence of undernutrition and food insecurity is increasing again after a long period of sustained progress in the fight against hunger and undernourishment. In 2024, the world has also seen its worst famine for decades, sparked by the war in Sudan. This illustrates the importance of working towards effective approaches that address all sides of the double burden of malnutrition, including overnutrition, obesity, unhealthy diets, undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and the broad range of conditions that are associated with suboptimal nutrition including type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stunting and wasting.

In these difficult times, the FoodSAMSA Consortium has made good progress in its work, as reported in this newsletter. We are proud to share our achievements and are available for any queries related to our work. We look forward to hearing any thoughts or comments, to learn about your work and experiences, and to discuss potential collaborations.

Best regards,

Prof. Dr. Peter von Philipsborn
Chair of Public Health and Health Services Research, LMU Munich
Co-PI of FoodSAMSA, on behalf of the FoodSAMSA Consortium



Inside this issue

Work Packages 1/2	2
Work Packages 3/4	3
Work Package 5	4
Work Package 6	5
Work Packages 7/8	6
Recent Events	7
Spotlight on researcher	8
Consortium members	9

About us

FoodSAMSA is a four-year project that addresses the double burden of malnutrition (undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, obesity) by assessing its determinants and by exploring interventions at the macro (policy), meso (community) and micro (interpersonal) level.

The project includes the adaptation of existing approaches for assessing and improving food environments to countries facing a double burden of malnutrition; implementation of these adapted approaches in South Africa; strengthening capacity and expanding regional networks to support food environment and systems research and action across sub-Saharan Africa.

The project is conducted by three partner institutions in South Africa (SAMRC, University of the Western Cape School of Public Health and Chronic Disease Initiative for Africa) and Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) in Munich, Germany.

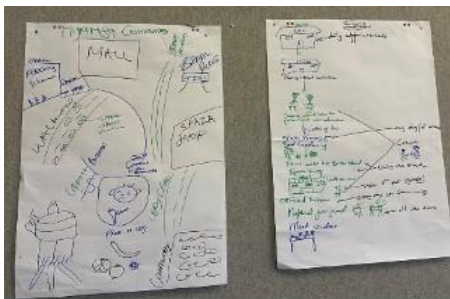
WP1

had a busy year in 2024 focused on complex systems mapping. To inform the mapping exercise, interviews were held with Community Health Workers (CHWs) and program managers (micro-level perspective stakeholders) in three townships as well as food policy researchers, civil society representatives and city and provincial government employees (meso-level perspective stakeholders) between November 2023 to April 2024. These interviews helped inform the group model building workshops in early 2024. A two-day workshop was organized with 13 CHWs and Western Cape on Wellness volunteers at the University of the Western Cape, which resulted in a causal loop diagram depicting the interrelationships between the drivers of the double burden of malnutrition (DBM) at the individual and household level in Cape Town and discussion of potential leverage points. In May and October 2024, half-day online workshops were held with eight meso-level stakeholders to create a causal loop diagram of the drivers and levers of the DBM at the household, community, and local policy level. Both diagrams emphasized the connections of food security with income and employment, food and nutrition literacy, access to land and infrastructure, and the importance of informal traders. In 2025, data analysis continues, and the findings will be shared with stakeholders in a dissemination even later this year.



WP2

In 2024, the [systematic review](#) on recommendations for the food industry to address undernutrition and the double burden of malnutrition (DBM) was completed, proposing 28 recommended actions. Results were presented at the [World Public Health Nutrition Congress](#) in June in London, UK, and the manuscript is currently under review. The subsequent [Delphi study](#) included 30 global experts and was carried out between April and November. After three consecutive survey rounds the expert panel selected 9 undernutrition and/or DBM indicators for inclusion in the extension of the INFORMAS [BIA-Obesity](#) tool for countries facing a DBM context. The results of this work were presented at the annual congress of the German Nutrition Society in March 2025 and the extended tool is currently pilot-tested in South Africa ([study protocol](#)), assessing the voluntary commitments and practices of 13 food manufacturers, two non-alcoholic beverage manufacturers, ten quick-service restaurant and four supermarket chains. First results will be presented at the [10th Annual Agriculture, Nutrition and Health \(ANH\) Academy Week](#) in June 2025.



WP3

The WP3 work on assessing the level of implementation of food policies in South Africa relevant to the DBM based on the [Food-EPI](#) (Healthy Food Environment Policy Index) tool developed by INFORMAS continued. Following up on our first policy benchmarking workshop in October 2023, a second hybrid workshop was held with academic and government stakeholders in March 2024. The participants received the results of the benchmarking assessment and a preliminary list of priority policy actions, which they adapted and ranked by greatest importance and achievability. To end, ten priority actions were selected in the field of food promotion, food prices, funding, and platforms for interaction. Publication of results is underway and other dissemination forms are planned for 2025.



WP4

In 2024, the focus of WP4 was on completing the food diary data collected from CHWs in Kensington, Nyanga, and Gugulethu. Follow-up efforts were made to resolve any missing data from participants. Data cleaning was also carried out in preparation for the upcoming analysis in 2025, which will form part of H Nonkeneza's master's Mini thesis. This research aims to explore food choice and the factors influencing food choices among CHWs, with a focus on how socio-economic and environmental factors impact food decisions. A [paper](#) was published by the WP4 team on the extent of outdoor food and beverage advertising surrounding primary and secondary schools in poorly resourced townships in Cape Town, and data was collected for the PhD of A Wentzel (FoodSAMSA spin-off) assessing lifestyle-related drivers and prevalence of adolescent metabolic syndrome among high school learners in Cape Town. Data were collected using a survey questionnaire, clinical and anthropometric measures. Focus group discussions were conducted to assess the barriers faced by CHWs in implementing poorly resourced communities, which forms the basis of MK Mulalo's master's Mini thesis. A visiting student (S Van Uytvanghe) successfully defended her thesis on the association between CHW cardiovascular risk profiles and the walkability of South Africa's township built environment for her Masters in Global Health at Ghent University (Belgium).

WP5

In 2024, WP5 focused on the mapping of spaza shops and convenience stores across Gugulethu, Kensington, and Nyanga (368 in total). The first phase involved visiting communities to identify and record locations, followed by engagement with the shop owners to gain trust and invite participation in the study. Eight questionnaires were administered and 41 observational checklists completed, but engagement proved challenging due to language barriers as many shop owners are foreign nationals. The team sought translation support from community members, but reimbursement issues limited ongoing involvement. External organizations were approached to assist with facilitation, but this was not pursued due to unresolved discussions around costing and deliverables. In October 2024, the team also attended a workshop by the City of Cape Town's Environmental Health & Waste Management Department, which provided valuable connections and insights. National concerns then however arose following extensive media coverage of food safety and poisoning incidents linked to spaza shops, which led to data collection being paused in November 2024.



WP6 in 2024 focused on developing and preparing the Multimedia Entertainment

Education (MM-EE) pilot. The work, which aims at supporting CHWs in promoting healthy food choices and financial literacy in under-resourced communities, made significant progress. Several activities and key milestones were achieved, including the formation of a creative partnership with the service provider who was appointed to produce the intervention material. The work was grounded in qualitative research involving focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with CHWs to explore lived experiences. Five themes were extracted, which formed the backbone of the MM-EE content, and a draft script created and shared with the project team for input and feedback. From mid-2024, the script underwent a collaborative refinement process with the service provider to ensure cultural relevance and clarity of messaging. The first booklet was developed and internally discussed, and an animation video storyboard was also distributed for comments. The material was translated into local languages and the roll-out of the pilot discussed with local partners. Preparations for printing and dissemination of the MM-EE among CHWs in 2025 is ongoing.



WP7 aims at network and capacity building and covered several activities in 2024. As part of the networking efforts, P Delobelle and N Holliday organized 2 webinars focusing on the use of systems thinking in food environment research. The first webinar ‘How to put dinner on the table’ was organized by **SYSTAC** (Systems Thinking Accelerator) Europe as part of their Seminar Series on ‘Systems for Health: Systems thinking to improve health through societal systems’ and offered an introduction to the use of systems thinking in food systems research and its application in South Africa. The webinar was well attended and hosted a representative from the WEC Government who offered some reflections and useful perspectives. The second webinar aimed at the Food Environment Research listserv in sub-Saharan Africa via the affiliation with FERN and was also well attended.

CDIA also participated in The Africa-Europe Cluster of Research Excellence (ARUA/The Guild) on Food Environment Actions for the Promotion of Health (**FE4H**) to outline strategic action plans and prepare grant proposals, and a series of meetings by the ANH Academy Food Environments Working Group to discuss key concepts in food environment research.



WP8 In 2024, our team participated in several meetings and discussions related to the wider dissemination of FoodSAMSA project results including a bespoke issue briefs workshop in partnership with the Centre for Evidence-Based Healthcare at Stellenbosch University in April 2024 to wrap up research questions and evidence in user-friendly format for project stakeholders, in conjunction with the second FoodSAMSA consortium meeting. The WP3 team also participated in a workshop on addressing stunting in South Africa organized by Stellenbosch University and a stakeholder consultation for IDRC on regional child directed food and beverage marketing in sub-Saharan Africa organized by WITS University. FoodSAMSA members furthermore participated in and presented at the 5th Global Food Security Conference in Leuven, Belgium, and the World Public Health Nutrition Conference, University of Westminster in the UK in June 2024. Several team members also assisted in an external group model building workshop organized by the Chair of the WEC Chronic Diseases Steering Committee Working Group at UCT in view of external PhD requirements.

Strengthening Collaboration with the German Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Food & Regional Identity

In Jan 2025, PhD candidate Carmen Klinger gave a presentation about the FoodSAMSA progress made in 2024, as part of the “Right to Food” Cluster Meeting during the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) in Berlin, Germany. The meeting was attended by the Parliamentary Secretary of the German Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity (BMLEH), Mrs Claudia Muller, and hosted an array of speakers and insightful discussions.



On 20 Nov 2024, FoodSAMSA team members from SAMRC and UCT also attended a networking lunch hosted by the German Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity (BMLEH), with the aim of strengthening relationships in the field of agricultural cooperation between Germany and South Africa. The networking lunch, held on a rural wine farm in Cape Town, provided an excellent platform to discuss sustainable agricultural production practices and processes and the role they can play in supporting the transition towards sustainable food and farming systems.

With support from



Project manager



by decision of the
German Bundestag

Spotlight on Researcher

Name: Carmen Klinger

Ludwig-Maximilians-
Universität, Munich, Germany



Name: Magnifique

Nukunziza

SA Medical Research Council,
Cape Town, South Africa



Name: Sihle Mabhida

SA Medical Research Council,
Cape Town, South Africa



Name: Annalie Wentzel

SA Medical Research Council,
Cape Town, South Africa



My interest in food environment and systems research began during a 2013 internship in Ecuador, where I became fully aware of the impact of food environments on population nutrition and health. I observed how the widespread availability and desirability of giant soft drink bottles and sugar-laden cakes, combined with low physical activity - partly due to high crime rates - made it challenging for people to make healthy choices. This experience motivated me to pursue a second bachelor's degree in Nutritional Sciences at TU Munich, Germany, after studying Tourism Management at HM Munich, Germany. I later deepened my expertise with a master's in public health at LMU Munich, Germany.

As part of the FoodSAMSA project, my research focuses on the role of the food industry in addressing malnutrition. Several tools and frameworks have been developed to assess and benchmark the industry's voluntary commitments, and practices related to population nutrition and health. My work aims to adapt and extend an existing assessment tool (INFORMAS BIA-Obesity) for countries facing a double burden of malnutrition. The extended tool is currently being pilot tested in South Africa.

I am a student at the UWC School of Public Health University and research assistant with FoodSAMSA. I graduated with a master's degree in development studies at UWC in 2020, investigating the role of Meals on Wheels in promoting food security among older people. During my thesis I developed a deep interest in nutrition and the impact of food on overall wellbeing. I was also dealing with health issues and inspired to change my lifestyle which to the surprise of many resulted in recovery. This personal transformation, combined with insights gained during the COVID-19 pandemic when experiencing the importance of nutrition in shaping pandemic outcomes, strengthened my belief that many diseases could be prevented or managed through lifestyle changes. In FoodSAMSA, I focused my attention on improving the township food environment for informal food businesses, including the smaller community stores also known as spaza shops. My current work, and my thesis, contribute to Work Package 5 of the FoodSAMSA project. It is my hope that through these efforts, township residents will one day have better access to healthy food options offered in their local stores, contributing to improved public health and sustainable community development.

I am a dedicated emerging researcher employed in the Noncommunicable Disease Research Unit at the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). With a strong background in research, I hold an H-index of 13, supported by over 33 publications. I have played a pivotal role in establishing and leading a systematic review application webinar, which has resulted in more than 15 publications to date. I am also actively involved in the FoodSAMSA project, where I manage various WP and specialize in data analysis and publication production. In addition to my research contributions, I serve as a host and lecturer for the Meta-analysis, Biostatistics, and Systematic Reviews program under Trialect, USA. I founded and currently lead the SAMRC Football Club, as well as the HIV-NCD project within the Noncommunicable Disease Research Unit at SAMRC. Known for my collaborative spirit, I am a strong team player committed to driving impactful research and innovative projects in my field.

My interest in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) research began while working as an optometrist in Cape Town's public health sector, providing eye care to people living with diabetes. I was struck by how often patients with diabetic eye disease missed their ophthalmology appointments, and I became curious about the underlying reasons. This question became the foundation of my Master of Public Health studies at UWC. After completing my degree, I joined the FoodSAMSA team at the SAMRC NCD Research Unit as a PhD researcher. My thesis project, based within WP 4, focused on cardiometabolic disease risk among adolescents. As part of this work, we collected data to assess the prevalence and drivers of metabolic syndrome among high school learners in Cape Town. Alongside my thesis work, I also contributed to key FoodSAMSA milestones aimed at better understanding the community food environment in Cape Town. Local food choices and access play a central role in shaping people's nutrition and long-term health, and this work supports broader efforts to address NCD risk through environmental and systemic change.

FoodSAMSA Consortium members

Chronic Disease Initiative for Africa (UCT)

A/Prof Dr Peter Delobelle (Chronic Disease Initiative for Africa)
Prof Dr Vicki Lambert (Health through Physical Activity, Lifestyle and Sport)
Dr Olufunke Alaba (Health through Physical Activity, Lifestyle and Sport)

South Africa Medical Research Council (SAMRC)

A/Prof Dr Zandile J Mchiza (Non-Communicable Diseases Research Unit, SAMRC)
Dr Jillian Hill (Non-Communicable Diseases Research Unit, SAMRC)
Dr Sihle Mabhida (Non-Communicable Diseases Research Unit, SAMRC)
Bevan Esterhuizen (Non-Communicable Diseases Research Unit, SAMRC)
Magnifique Nkurunziza (Non-Communicable Diseases Research Unit, SAMRC)

University of the Western Cape (UWC)

Dr Martina Lembani (UWC School of Public Health)
Annalie Wentzel, MSc (UWC School of Public Health)
Hloli Nonkenezwa, MSc (UWC School of Public Health)
Kenneth Muhali Mulalo (UWC School of Public Health)

Pettenkofer School of Public Health (LMU)

Prof Dr Eva Rehfuess
Prof Dr Peter von Philipsborn
Dr Karin Geffert
Carmen Klinger, MSc
Elochukwu Okanmelu, MSc
Nicole Holliday, MSc

With support from



Federal Ministry
of Agriculture, Food
and Regional Identity

by decision of the
German Bundestag



For more information visit: <https://foodsamsa.samrc.ac.za/>

The project is supported by funds of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity (BMLEH) based on a decision of the Parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany via the Federal Office for Agriculture and Food (BLE).