

Food choices, lifestyles and South Africa's weighty problem

Evidence from Khayelitsha and Mitchell's Plain

Background

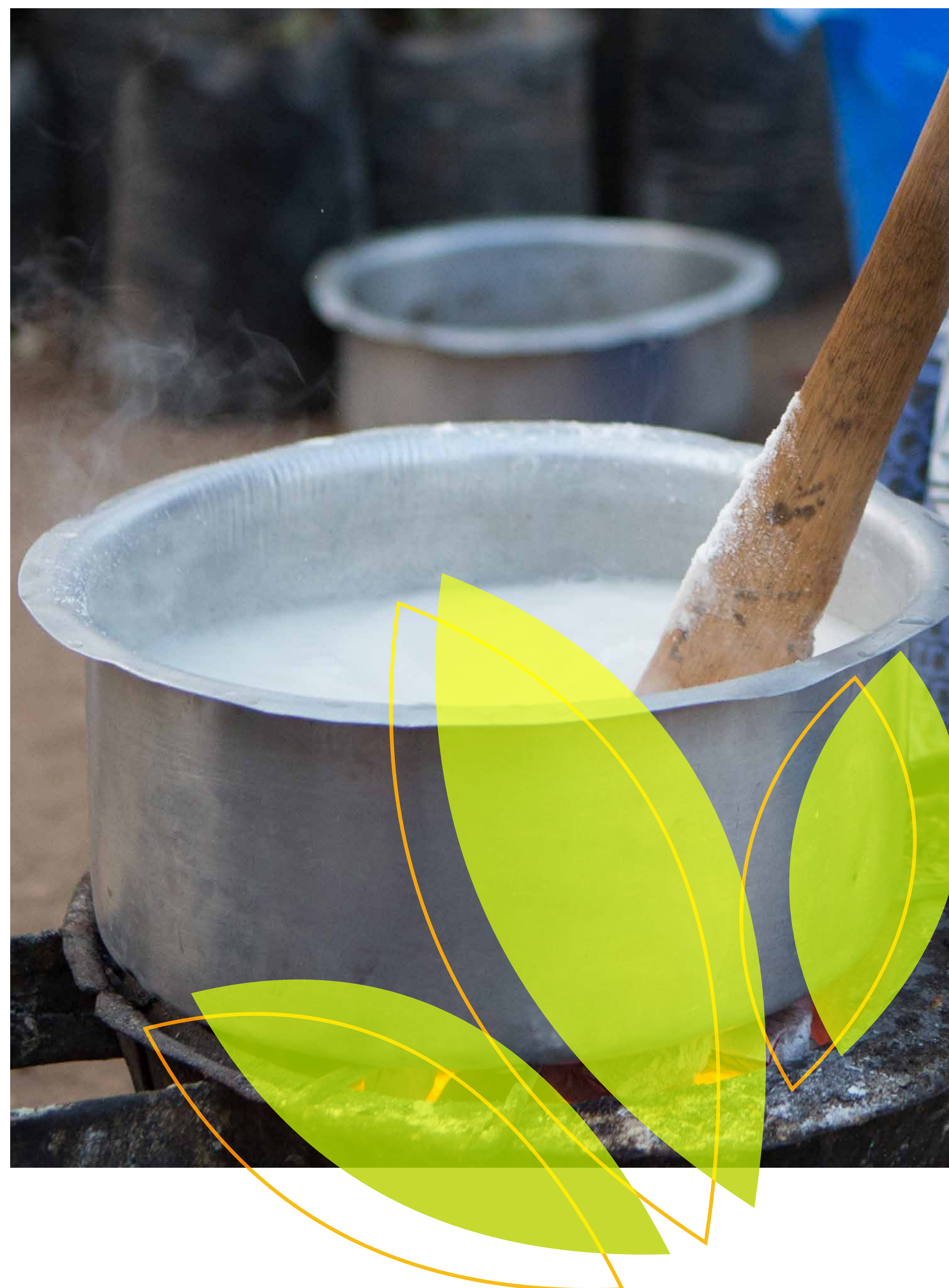
Obesity remains one of the crucial developmental challenges confronting post-apartheid South Africa, and poses significant health and economic consequences for the country. For example, in the last nine years, the government has spent more than R23 billion treating illnesses directly linked to obesity. In addition, it is predicted that the incidence of non-communicable lifestyle diseases will exceed that of infectious diseases in the near future and the cost to healthcare systems will amount to approximately R8 billion annually.

Methodology

Dealing with the country's growing 'weighty' problem requires a broader understanding of the food choices that people make and the lifestyles they engage in. Against this background, this research focused on the link between food choices and Body Mass Index (BMI) in adults and children in the townships of Khayelitsha and Mitchells Plain in the Western Cape. The study employed a mixed-methods research methodology, including drawing on the fourth wave of the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS), collecting data using self-administered questionnaires, and conducting focus groups, semi-structured interviews and observations.

Key findings

- Obesity prevalence for adults is very high and differs significantly across gender
- The prevalence of overweight in children aged 5-11 years is increasing fastest
- Diets are high in cereals, fats, sugar and fried foods, and low in fruits and vegetables
- Economic, social, and cultural factors determine people's food choices: Factors such as household income and the cost of food, accessibility and availability of food, religious and cultural influences, palatability/taste, familiarity (especially for vegetables), education and knowledge, time constraints, and the distance travelled to purchase food affected peoples' food choices.
- Engagement in weight management practices is low



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Policy recommendations

- Because price is often reported as a barrier to the purchase and consumption of healthy foods, strategies that increase incentives for purchasing healthier food options should be pursued by government.
- Physical activity initiatives should be launched at different levels (national, provincial, municipal, district, etc.) and should include settings such as schools, universities, workplaces, communities, healthcare facilities, and religious centres, all of which can exercise an important role in preventing and controlling the prevalence of overweight and obesity.
- The consumption of fruits and vegetables needs to be promoted nationwide through various media outlets. Government should increase support for the production of fruits and vegetables, especially for home gardens in urban areas and, with support from the private sector and NGOs, roll out food voucher interventions that may directly promote the consumption of fruits and vegetables. In addition, the provision of fresh fruit and vegetables to students at schools should be supported in coordination with the National School Nutrition Programme and the Integrated School Health Policy.
- Taxation schemes that produce large changes in price can change purchasing habits and are likely to improve health. It is recommended that the rationale behind the South African Government's 'sin' taxes (e.g cigarettes) and the recent sugar tax on beverages be extended to other foods high in sugars.
- Nutrition education and social marketing campaigns, which are effective in changing consumer behaviour and consumption patterns, should focus on impacting dietary and physical activity behaviour in both children and adults.



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