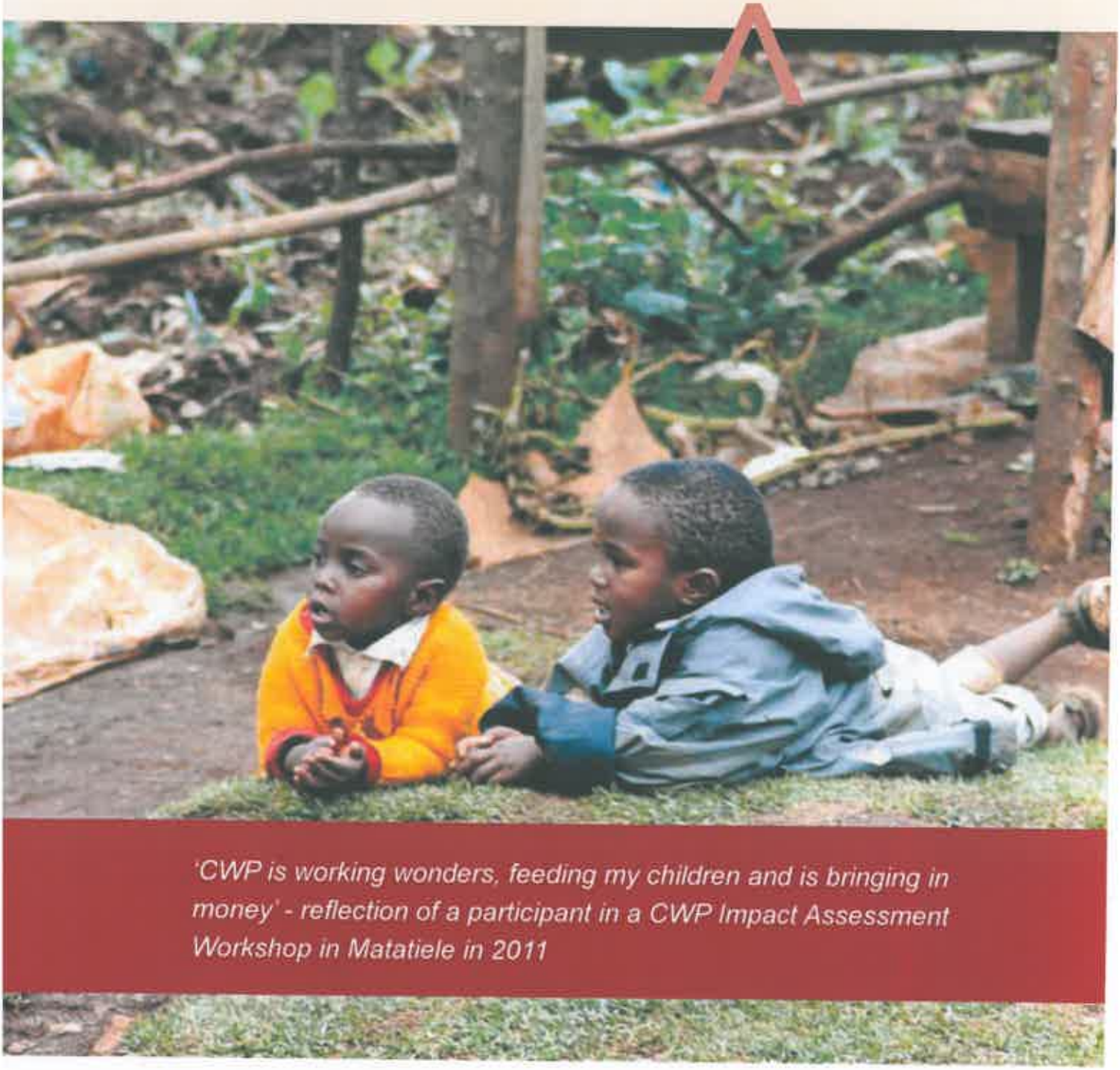
Food for thought: the COMMUNITY WORK PROGRAMME

Food security refers to the availability of food and people's access to it. A household is considered food-secure when its occupants do not live in hunger or fear of starvation; it includes both physical and economic access to food that meets people's dietary needs as well as their food preferences.



'CWP is working wonders, feeding my children and is bringing in money' - reflection of a participant in a CWP Impact Assessment Workshop in Matatiele in 2011

The Presidency piloted an innovative type of public work scheme that has the potential to help meet the food security and nutrition needs of vulnerable children. Shirin Motala and Peter Jacobs discuss new evidence that the Community Work Programme (CWP), introduced in 2007, may do just that.

The Community Work Programme is an employment guarantee scheme providing participants with two days' work per week to a total of 100 days per year at a stipend of R60 per day. At the time of this research in 2011, more than 70 CWP sites were operational across the country involving just under 100 000 participants.

In his 2012 budget speech Minister Gordhan announced a government commitment to scale up the programme to reach over 300 000 participants by 2014.

During 2011 the HSRC undertook a study of the CWP to assess the potential contribution it could make towards improving the food and nutrition security and early childhood development (ECD) outcomes for young children. It was anticipated that through the study a case could be made for strengthening CWP's ability to address critical public needs and service deficits while at the same time providing safety nets for the poor.

This qualitative study involved a review of available information about the CWP and primary research through key informant interviews and focus groups. The study was conducted in 17 CWP sites (approximately 25% of all sites), including urban and rural sites across eight provinces. Interviews were conducted with key informants including local and provincial CWP implementation agents, ECD community-based organisations, community reference group members and provincial and local government officials. In total, 79 interviews and six focus group sessions were conducted.

A key feature of the CWP is that work done must be 'useful work' that contributes to broader community good or to quality of life. Types of 'work' activities that have been prioritised by CWP sites include: agricultural and food security interventions; environmental rehabilitation and maintenance; social and community services, including home-based care and community safety interventions.

What is the potential contribution of the CWP towards improving the food and nutrition security and early childhood development (ECD) outcomes for young children? In the context of high levels of poverty, unemployment, and HIV prevalence, children in South Africa live in extreme situations of vulnerability in terms of their survival, growth and development.

MEANINGS ATTACHED TO FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

The most common understanding of food and nutrition security was of 'three meals a day' and freedom from 'hunger'. The concept 'security' in relation to food and nutrition was almost foreign to some respondents who reportedly 'never heard of it before'. Nutritious or healthy food for children was typically listed as staple grains and cereals (maize, bread, wheat products) and vegetables (spinach, carrots, cabbage, tomatoes, potatoes).

In a few rural locations the need for children to eat 'green leafy vegetables' was noted, although no reasons were provided for this suggestion, presumably due its nutritional value.

Overall, 'nutritionally adequate' or 'healthy' food for children appeared to be primarily about the intake of calories and starches whereas proteins or fruit did not feature frequently in the ideal meal-plan for children under five. Dietary diversity was not understood and neither was there a sense of children's macronutrient requirements (vitamin A, zinc, iron) or appropriate portion sizes.

NATURE AND SCALE OF FOOD GARDEN PROJECTS

Food gardening appears to be a central activity in almost all CWP sites through the development and maintenance of communal food gardens, home food gardens and food gardens targeting particular vulnerable groups (for example early childhood development (ECD) centres, hospitals or clinics and institutions providing care for the elderly, disabled and for children). The overarching goal of the food gardens is to cultivate and harvest foods (mainly varieties of small vegetable crops) for community members unable to provide enough of their own food or who might be at risk of food insecurity.

These beneficiaries are typically identified through community consultation processes based on poverty and vulnerability criteria or perceptions ('needy community members') and include those who are elderly, chronically ill, disabled or caring for vulnerable children. Site managers cited 'willingness to work in community gardens by participants (supply of labour input/work effort)' as the fundamental determinant of whether a food garden existed at a CWP site.

The scale of CWP food garden production across sites expanded over time as well as in the numbers of beneficiaries reached as the figures below indicate:

- At the Meriting CWP site (North West), the initial goal was to provide hungry school children with a meal. This was broadened subsequently to providing food to 'orphans and other vulnerable households';
- At the Harrismith site (Free State) 20 food gardens were providing food to home-based care beneficiaries as well as early childhood development centres;

- At the Keiskammahoek site (Eastern Cape) 54 schools, 30 crèches and a hospital had been supported in establishing and maintaining food gardens;
- The Welkom (Free State) site has become a platform for the launch of over 400 home food gardens under the auspices of the Mercy of Life Community Project; and
- Sterkspruit (Eastern Cape) has developed and maintained 5 000 home gardens.

Three types of distribution channels for food production output were predominantly identified, namely outputs from home gardens are for household occupants, outputs from gardens on unused land at schools and institutions (residential care facilities, hospitals) were for beneficiaries of those services, while outputs from communal gardens were donated to 'needy beneficiaries'. Recognising that hungry children need to eat even out of school, at some sites it was reported that in addition to feeding children at the ECD site they were given food to take home. At the Bohlabela site in Mpumalanga food donations were the norm with the previous season's tally of donated food garden output being '50 boxes of tomatoes; 100 boxes of cabbages; 100 bunches of spinach; 100 bunches of okra and 50 boxes of Moroga'.

A fourth distribution channel, although not encouraged by CWP, was the sale of marketable surplus food garden products. At a few sites the funds generated from such sales were utilised to purchase seeds and other requirements for expanding the food garden or as in the Bulungula site (Eastern Cape) example for purchasing meat and milk products to feed children at the crèche.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR FOOD GARDENING INTERVENTIONS

The nature and extent of support from local departments of agriculture was uneven across CWP sites. Where support was available it included education and training and farming inputs such as fencing. We also identified local government (access to land) and non-profit organisations as stakeholders that provided support and assisted with funding.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of CWPs is to contribute to the quality of life of poor and vulnerable people and evidence suggests that its food security interventions can do just that. However it needs to intentionally incorporate household food security and nutrition security objectives in project design. This will ensure that food security and nutrition concerns are appropriately addressed.

CWP needs to be intentional about measuring impacts on food security and nutrition and ECD services on young children.

CWP also needs to explore the potential for CWP to promote animal food production to provide access to protein and dairy produce. In addition it needs to encourage the production of micronutrient-rich crop varieties.

Several CWP food gardens produce enough to sell surplus output in local markets even if the programme does not encourage this practice. CWP is designed to invest public resources in useful community employment projects and not geared towards local enterprise development. Further planning and strategising should focus on enabling the transition of CWP food gardens to sustainable farming enterprises. As in the traditional 'infant industry paradox', the challenge is to find the appropriate cut-off ('exit strategy') for reduced public support alongside increased self-sustaining investment in the enterprise.

Typical CWP workers in food security are women, mainly older women. It is important to incentivise men and younger people to work in food gardening initiatives.

Finally the benefits accruing from the social solidarity contributions of CWP need to be explicitly acknowledged and supported.

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To maximise nutritional impact on vulnerable groups CWPs need to consider the following:

- include the integration of nutrition counselling, which includes supporting farmers in agricultural production, either for their own use or for commercial production, particularly in cases counselling women; and
- pay greater attention to identifying key target groups requiring nutritional support.

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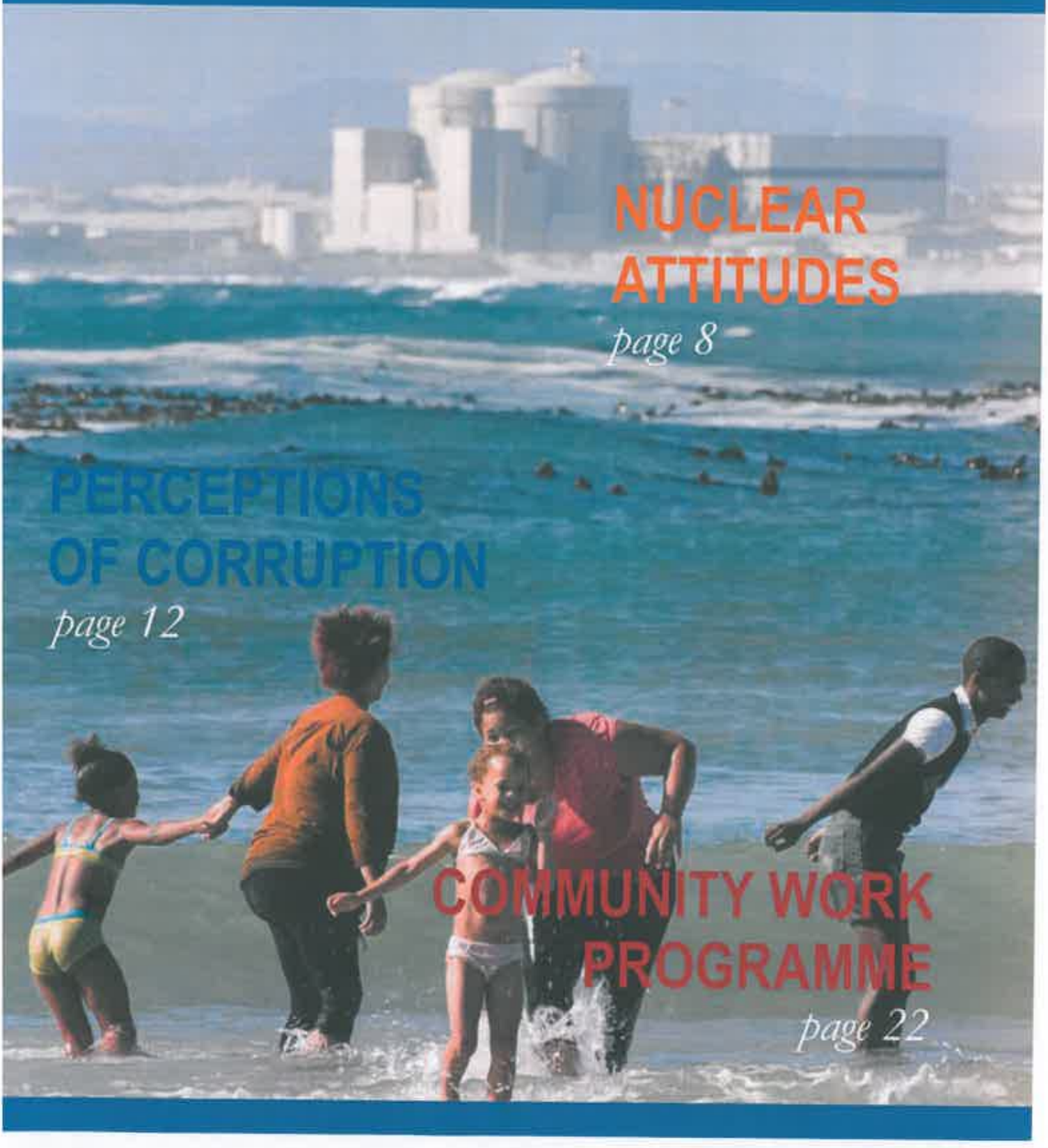

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