

Reflecting on 10 years at FoodForward SA

By [Andy du Plessis](#), issued by [FoodForward SA](#)

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My first day at FoodForward SA (then FoodBank SA) was quite memorable. I started in August 2013 with an overwhelming excitement to be part of a national organisation that promoted the recovery of edible surplus food from the food system to make sure that every person in South Africa had access to food, and to make a contribution to end hunger and malnutrition. I was eager to learn more, and I had several ideas to add value and advance the cause of food security across South Africa using foodbanking as a model.



Andy Du Plessis, 2016

On the morning of my first day, I met with staff and got a 'lay of the land'. I learned that, prior to my arrival, the organisation had four different managing directors in five years. Later that morning I received a call from one of our board members notifying me that we needed to hold an emergency board meeting that afternoon because "there were no funds to carry on with operations or pay salaries". Suddenly (and for the next two years) a flash of "what the hell did I get myself into here?" came rushing over me. I had to make a crucial decision – do I stay and slog it out (which could possibly be career limiting if I failed) or do I abandon ship (like some of my predecessors).

Needless to say, I decided to stay! Thankfully, we received a loan from the FoodForward SA Foundation (previously FoodBank Foundation), so that we could continue to operate and pay salaries. What followed for the next three years was a very difficult journey to turn the organisation around. For the larger part of that period in the journey (the good, the bad, and the ugly), it was like starting from scratch.

Leading from the front, under severe pressure and in very difficult circumstances requires a strong vision, tenacity, a sharp focus, sheer determination, and a little bit of crazy. It is certainly not for the faint of heart. First, I had to get a firm grasp of our current reality as an organisation, compare this with our desired future, see where the gaps were and how best to narrow the gaping chasm.

Our initial key objectives were to strengthen the organisation's financial position; improve systems and processes across various departments; introduce policies and procedures, identify key KPIs, etc. all of which were sadly lacking. We also

had to retrench one third of our staff complement, reduce the salaries of the staff that remained, and close two branches. Staff morale, as you can imagine, was not great.

With the support of the staff that stayed and slogged it out with me, along with our board, over the next few years we managed to turn things around. Our financial position improved, we onboarded more food and financial donors, we introduced various programmes, our operations improved, we opened new branches, hired more staff, increased our fleet capacity, moved to larger warehouses, and increased our BO network.



Then the exciting stuff started to emerge. We began to imagine a national organisation with a scalable model, able to make a more meaningful impact across South Africa. In 2017 we introduced our own digital technology, FoodShare, which is now implemented across Woolworths, PnP, and Food Lovers Market stores, we extended our reach into several under-served rural communities across the country, we expanded our fleet, and started a SETA accredited Supply Chain internship. Here are some interesting metrics worth comparing:

FoodForward SA Then and Now		
Metric	2013	2023
Beneficiary Organisations	266	2,750
Beneficiaries	86,000	985,000
Cost Per Meal	R1,73	R0,56
Tons of Food Distributed	3,300	22,120
Staff	49	87

With a strong leadership team now in place, dedicated staff serving our national BO network, an active board supporting us, and awesome food and financial donors supporting our mission and vision, we were in a good position to navigate the devastating pandemic, respond timeously and meaningfully to several riots and disasters, and build our own fit for purpose national head office and Cape Town warehouse under one roof.



We have pioneered the advocacy for regulatory changes in South Africa to include food donations and food safety guidelines for food donations, which we believe are imminent.

Today FoodForward SA is the largest food redistribution organisation in the country, providing nutritious food every month to a network of 2,750 beneficiary organisations reaching nearly one million vulnerable people daily.

While much has been achieved, there is no time for complacency. FoodForward SA can play a more pivotal role across the food system and the food security space, using foodbanking to promote sustainable livelihoods and unlocking economic opportunities for our youth and women.

Honestly, when I started 10 years ago, I could not have imagined the kind of success, reach and impact we have achieved in such a short period of time. I am blessed to have been given the opportunity to lead this incredible organisation. I am proud of what we have achieved so far, and I'm excited about the future for FoodForward SA and South Africa in general. Watch this space!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy du Plessis is managing director of FoodForward SA.

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