Submission by the Just Transition in the Food System group to the SAHRC Inquiry into South African food systems

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A) Introduction

1. Overview of the Just Transition in the Food System group

The Just Transition in the Food System group is a loose network of organisations that came together in 2023 around the need for - and to collectively elaborate a common perspective on - a just transition in the South African food system. It seeks to bring together organisations representing or working with smallholder farmers, trade unions, informal workers, farm workers, working class women, and NGOs to find common ground and advance common policy objectives framed by a just transition. One of the key objectives is therefore to increase the voice of these sectors in shaping food system policy, in response to the inordinate role of more powerful incumbent actors in shaping policy in their favour, and to shift policy beyond a primary orientation simply to economic growth, competitiveness, and export growth for the food system, to multiple considerations and objectives in the vein of a just transition.

In short, a just transition is needed in the food system because it is a notable contributor to climate change and other environmental problems, but is also extremely vulnerable to climate change impacts. This means policy needs to build a heightened concern with achieving a more environmentally sustainable and resilient food system, and at the same time address the deep social injustices prevalent in the food system, related to food and nutrition insecurity, land, the needs of smallholder farmers, conditions of work, marginalisation of small actors like food traders, and corporate power. We therefore define a just transition as one that achieves a food system that is environmentally sustainable and resilient, creates decent work and improved livelihoods, and fulfils the right to food. At our first national convening, we developed a Civil Society Framework for a Food System Just Transition, that frames a set of key principles that should guide policy and action to achieve a just transition: meet human needs (labour justice, just food chain structure, right to vital foods including food and water, livelihood opportunities), ecological integrity, participatory and democratic (through just and participatory processes, and access to relevant information), respect and be inclusive of diversity, and build capacity. This submission is informed by this perspective on how we think the South African food system should function, be structured, and what it should achieve.

2. Importance of a comprehensive SAHRC inquiry

We appreciate the opportunity to make this submission to the SAHRC Inquiry. We consider this Inquiry to be timely in light of the severity of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition faced by millions of children and adults daily, within the context of sufficient national food supply. The Inquiry Terms of Reference aptly references the severity of the problem, and we restate some of the key facts for emphasis. Stunting rates have remained stagnant at over 25% for the last decade. Approximately 29% of children under five are currently stunted, and over 60% of four-year-olds are not meeting developmental milestones.[1] South Africa faces a simultaneous crisis of undernutrition (stunting and wasting), micronutrient deficiencies (hidden hunger), and rising obesity due to a reliance on nutrient-poor, highly processed “poverty foods”.[2]

While we welcome the spotlight that the National Inquiry will place on these lived realities, the questions it will ask of the powerful in the food system, and the recommendations and directives it will issue to the various duty-bearers of the right to food; we simultaneously have concerns about the Inquiry process and potential limitations. Our principal concerns relate to

[1] Wand, H., Naidoo, S., Govender, V., Reddy, T., & Moodley, J. (2024). Preventing stunting in South African children under 5: Evaluating the combined impacts of maternal characteristics and low socioeconomic conditions. Journal of Prevention, 45(3), 339–355. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-024-00766-2

[2] Simelane, M., et al. (2024). National Food and Nutrition Security Survey: National Report. (Preprint/Source: ResearchGate/Ilifa Labantwana).

the inclusivity of the process and its accessibility. It is our view that all food-related policies, processes, and inquiries should ensure maximum public participation by those who are affected by hunger and food insecurity. We note, at the time of writing, that no provincial or local hearings are envisaged. In addition, a written submission process remains specialised and inaccessible to many in South Africa.

3. Structure of our submission, including additional themes

The structure of the submission follows the themes put forward in the terms of reference. Due to the nature of our network and the expertise and experiences it brings together, we provide input under all seven themes. However, we have identified three additional themes that we regard as having substantial bearing on the food system – both in how it operates and how it impacts on people – and we provide separate inputs on these under themes 8 through 10. Our submissions under each theme present some introductory comments to provide context and framing, followed by a discussion of challenges, and then recommendations.

It may be that the Commission envisaged inputs on climate change to fall under Theme 5 (Indigenous Knowledge and Agroecology), however, due to the importance of this issue (both in how the industrialised food system contributes to climate change and how climate change is affecting food production) we make inputs under a separate Theme 8 entitled “Climate Change and the South Africa Food System”. Further, the Commission might have envisaged that the realisation of the right to food as it pertains to children and women be included under Theme 4 (The Indivisibility of Rights), however, due to the unique ways in which women experience food insecurity, we include Theme 9 entitled “Gender as a Cross-Cutting Vector in Advancing the Right to Food”. Finally, although also relevant to the indivisibility of rights, the severity of the impact of hunger and malnutrition on children and the urgency with which this needs to be addressed, has led us to include a focused submission on this topic under Theme 10 “Child Hunger and Malnutrition”.

4. Summary and highlights of our submission

Theme 1 – The structural dynamics and economic factors that perpetuate hunger and systemic exclusions, despite national food sufficiency.

Key points:

- Hunger and malnutrition are and have been a persistently entrenched feature of South African society, and stubbornly reflect our history: the development of the South African economy on the basis of racialised land dispossession and low wage labour perpetuated hunger, malnutrition, and poor health for the Black majority. Post-apartheid economic policy, and the economics of the food system, have failed to disrupt these foundations.
- A key overarching economic feature of the food system post-1994 is the prioritisation of market forces to guide the sector and associated deregulation and liberalisation. This has been insufficient to address entrenched inequalities and produce a fairer economics of the food system. Instead, we have seen increased concentration, which raises barriers to entry for historically disadvantaged farmers, is linked to unjust pricing behaviour and patterns that undermine the right to food, and undermines the goals of agrarian reform.
- Deregulation also handed over food prices to the market, with little regulatory framework for food pricing apart from competition policy. Patterns of rising food costs have vastly

disproportionate impacts on low-income households, which adds to malnutrition, child stunting, and the reproduction of inequality in our economy. Rising prices of electricity and transport also worsen nutritional outcomes. While social protection has been a crucial intervention to stem the negative effects of food system economics on the poorest households, it alone is not enough to address the food insecurity and malnutrition crisis.

Recommendations:

- A combination of policy interventions are needed to achieve the right to food in light of the current economics of the food system. The value of the child support grant should be increased to at least the food poverty line, and the social relief of distress grant (SRD) should be transitioned into a basic universal income. Research has affirmed the positive impact that such measures would have on the right to food.
- A variety of interventions are required to address the economics of the food system. This should include moving beyond relying on free market forces to a role for policy and regulation to more actively steer the market to socially desirable outcomes, including requiring large supermarkets to reduce the gap between shelf prices and farm gate prices for essential food items; measures to increase transparency in pricing behaviour by large actors especially in processing, manufacturing, and retail; and other economic policy options like buffer stocks, enhancing competition policy, standard setting and subsidies for climate resilient production; and possibly a role for the public sector in food distribution and retail.
- Support more localised food systems, through producer support for ecological production, market access, and infrastructure provision, linked to health, social policy, and agroecology.

Theme 2 - The concentration of power in the food value chain and its impact on access, affordability, and nutritional quality.

Key points:

- There has been an increase in concentration and corporate power over the food system since 1994. Concentration is particularly high in key nodes such as agricultural inputs (in particular commercial seed and pesticides, and imported agricultural machinery), poultry breeding stock and production, cattle feedlots, some sectors of food manufacturing (bakery products, sugar and sugar products, beverages), ocean (marine) fisheries, consumer food service and retail, all sectors where five or fewer companies dominate the markets. Financialisation of food system corporations and international ownership has also increased, and digitalisation is providing avenues for corporations to collect data and profit from subsequent ownership.
- This corporate power translates into capture of food system governance, private governance of sub-sectors, self-regulation, lobbying power to water down regulations, and shaping of the consumer food environment through pricing, marketing, and product formulation. Regulations and laws also reflect the needs of agribusiness, and the functioning of corporate-led value chains are not amenable to inclusion and so limit economic participation.
- Despite its apparent technical sophistication and global competitiveness, the commercial food system has failed to deliver the Constitutional right to food. Food insecurity and hunger remain at high levels that do not reflect the country's economic status. This speaks to entrenched inequality, revealing poor socio-economic outcomes from the food system. Smallholder farmers, small-scale fishers, informal sector workers and consumers are marginalised. Low wages and precarious work continue to underpin commercial profitability.

Recommendations:

- Restrict and regulate corporate concentration across food value chains, particularly in processing and retail, where dominant firms shape prices and consumer access; coupled

with redistribution of resources to enable wider economic participation. This must include measures to maintain community control over data and ensure data justice.
- Adopt democratic, participatory and inclusive multi-level and multi-actor food system governance in ways that ensure effective democratic representation and participation of the mass of the population in food systems governance and decision-making
- Given the corporate shaping of governance, undertake a comprehensive review of all laws, policies, programmes, and regulations relating to the food system across multiple sectors/functional areas, identify priority areas for intervention, and undertake legal and policy realignment around the realisation of the right to food.

Theme 3 - The link between land access, tenure security, and food insecurity, especially for women, smallholder, and communal farmers

Key points:
- Land and the right to food are intrinsically linked. Addressing land inequity is essential for restoring dignity, reducing inequality, and ensuring that marginalised groups have access to land and the means to feed themselves. Secure access to land is therefore critical to the right to food, making land reform an urgent imperative. Yet there is clear evidence that the existing tools available for land reform (including Constitutional provisions) have not been used to maximum efficiency or effectiveness, with the result that the land reform programme has been highly flawed, slow and ineffectual, and has not made the contribution it could to agricultural development and self-reliance.
- This has a number of dimensions. Insecure land tenure undermines the ability of households to sustain themselves with secure, protected land rights, and includes a lack of decision making power about land use and food production. This particularly affects farm dwellers, farm workers, and those on communal land. Communal smallholder and commonage farmers continue to face severe constraints related to resources, insecure rights, poor support, competition with commercial farmers, and conflict with residential developments. Cutting across these is the profound gender inequalities that women experience in land access, tenure security, and agricultural support, and an over-representation in precarious and seasonal farm employment.

Recommendations:
- Enhance land access through measures such as sub-division of agricultural land to farmworkers and farm dwellers with secure tenure, and expropriate land where commercial agricultural owners commit human rights violations, and as a tool for human protection, such as from displacement.
- Improve life on the land by measures such as strengthening legal protection for farm workers and dwellers by expanding the scope of the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA) to include pathways to permanent tenure and access to land through land reform, improving support to communal and commonage farmers through alignment of DRDLR and CoGTA commonage policy and land management, ensuring redistributed land includes basic infrastructure, long-term financing, and fertile, tested land, and amending the Communal Land Tenure Act to ensure democratic, transparent decision-making in communal land governance.
- Prioritise women and youth for land access, elevate women in informal agriculture through pathways into formal land access and agricultural systems, and provide dedicated infrastructure and input support to women in both formal and informal agriculture.

Theme 4: The Indivisibility of Rights

Key points:

- The interdependence or indivisibility of rights is a fundamental tenet of international human rights law. Certain rights, including access to sufficient food, are considered foundational because they are prerequisites for the enjoyment of all other rights. Without adequate nutrition, individuals cannot meaningfully exercise rights to education, work, health, dignity or equality. The Constitutional guarantees to sufficient food and water and every child's right to basic education impose both negative and positive duties on the state.
- Often viewed as a national or provincial matter, food security is rarely prioritized at a local government level, although food insecurity is experienced locally. Moreover, in some instances, municipal enforcement practices can negatively impact the local food system, for example through the disruption of informal trade. Taken together, these dynamics highlight both the positive obligations of the state (to plan, provide, and support access to food) and the negative obligations (to refrain from actions that exacerbate food insecurity), underscoring that the realization of the right to food requires coordinated action across all levels of government.
- The environmental costs within South Africa's industrial food systems are externalised, highlighting the interplay between various rights, such as that to food, water, and a healthy environment. Intensive livestock production consumes significant water and land resources and contributes to soil degradation and water pollution in several regions. Although retail prices may appear affordable, the environmental costs of water depletion, pollution and land degradation are not fully internalised. Instead, these costs are shifted onto communities through reduced access to clean water, environmental harm and long-term chronic illness. This dynamic undermines the constitutional interdependence between the rights to food, water, health, dignity and a healthy environment. When environmental governance fails to regulate the cumulative impacts of intensive production systems, food security becomes precarious and inequitable. Vulnerable communities bear disproportionate exposure to degraded environments while simultaneously facing limited access to diverse and nutritious food options. In this way, fragmented environmental regulation and food policy contribute to structural food insecurity.

Recommendations:

- Adopt a Right-to-Food Framework Act to define "sufficient food," clarify government responsibilities, and establish coordination and reporting mechanisms.
- Strengthen coordination between environmental, water, health, and food governance structures, particularly at municipal level.
- The right to food must be explicitly integrated into environmental decision-making, including Environmental Impact Assessment (EIAs), land-use approvals, and municipal planning instruments. Environmental compliance and monitoring should assess impacts on local food systems, not only biophysical indicators. The SAHRC should recognize environmental mismanagement as a contributing factor to violations of the right to food and strengthen accountability accordingly.

Theme 5 - The role of indigenous knowledge systems, traditional seed practices, and agroecology in achieving food security and resilience

Key points:

- Indigenous food systems, on which agroecology is based, take a holistic approach to producing, distributing and consuming food based on principles such as fairness and respect for nature. These were deliberately marginalised by colonial and apartheid support for large-scale, commercial monoculture production, which benefited white landholders at the expense of the Black majority. Similar patterns of support continued after the advent of democracy. Active support for agroecology and Indigenous knowledge are required as a form of redress, and to correct the imbalance.
- Agroecology contributes to all 6 pillars of the food security (and the right to food) through diversified production systems that can boost yields, improve dietary diversity, reduce the lean season, improve soil health, enhance biodiversity at farm and landscape level, reduce farmer dependence on external inputs, enhance farmer autonomy and improve the social and environmental outcomes of farming. Both agroecology and Indigenous knowledge play a critical role in enhancing farmer and community resilience to climate change.
- In addition to helping to realise the right to food, agroecology can simultaneously help South Africa achieve other policy objectives such as poverty reduction, decent rural livelihoods, and better enjoyment of the rights to water, health and a healthy environment. Agroecology also contributes to the realisation of farmers' rights, as expressed in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA). Mainstreaming agroecology across agricultural and other policies will further support South Africa's realisation of international obligations under the Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture and the Paris Climate Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Recommendations:

- Provide appropriate agroecological support to small-scale farmers, including land and water access, agroecological inputs, as well as agroecological extension (as well as farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing). Stop providing synthetic chemical inputs and genetically modified seeds.
- Provide stable markets for small-scale agroecology farmers through government procurement as well as provision of municipal market infrastructure and other alternatives to the big corporate retailers.
- Finalise and implement the National Agroecology Framework for South Africa (NAFSA), ensuring that implementation is mainstreamed across the entire Department of Agriculture, as well as other departments (e.g., Health, Education, Trade and Industry). Revise existing agriculture laws and policies as needed to align with the NAFSA and agroecology principles, in particular the Plant Breeders Rights and Plant Improvement Acts, and accompanying regulations, which currently restrict Farmers' Rights. Ensure the National Food and Nutrition Security Plan (NFNSP) is widely consulted on, finalised and implemented, and that it incorporates support for agroecology.

Theme 6 - Systemic Failure and Fragmented Governance

Key points:

- The nature of the food system in South Africa is not something that has organically emerged because it was the most appropriate or efficient. It was systematically created to meet particular racist and elite interests. The state today must put in place legislation and policies that explicitly challenge the injustices of this system in order to build a

more just, equitable, and sustainable food system geared to serving the majority, and in particular those in poverty.

- One of the first steps to giving effect to rights in the Constitution is for the government to pass legislation to create the legal mechanisms and clarity, in terms of rights and obligations, that would facilitate implementation and accountability. The failure to pass enabling legislation specifically to give effect to Section 27 and 28 of the Constitution, 30 years after the Constitution was adopted, is a glaring failure.
- There was a five-year National Food and Nutrition Security Plan (NFNSP) for the period 2018 to 2023, which, according to government's evaluation, was largely not implemented and thus not effective. The key structure that was supposed to oversee and coordinate implementation, the National Food and Nutrition Security Council, was not established, and no budgets were made available specifically for implementation. While work has been underway for almost two years now to write the new NFNSP, at this point the country has had no plan in place for achieving the constitutionally mandated right to food (food and nutrition security).
- Urban food insecurity is a rising challenge that is given insufficient attention. With the responsibility for national food and nutrition security policy sitting with the National Department of Agriculture (NDA), who focus on agricultural development and production support in rural areas, there is a risk that the urban (and issues of access) will continue to be marginalized.

Recommendations:

- Immediately finalise, consult widely on, and adopt the new NFNSP.
- Establish the National Food and Nutrition Security Council with strong inter-governmental and non-state actor participation, including a non-state Deputy Chair or Chairperson. Set up similar councils at provincial and district levels. Support the effective operation of the National Food and Nutrition Security Council with political support, budgets, and powers.
- Explicitly include food and nutrition security responsibilities in the mandate of all local governments with requirements for the inclusion of food system and food and nutrition security provisions in Integrated Development Plans and Spatial Development plans.
- Support local governments to: improve investment and management of existing municipal fresh produce markets; provide space and infrastructure for more local food markets; secure more trading space and rights to trade in local regulations; and reserve public land for food production in all areas (urban and rural).

Theme 7- The role of civic participation, public accountability and social movements in advancing the right to food

Key points:

- The right to food is a political question, not a technical one. South Africa has sufficient food for the entire population, yet a high proportion remains hungry due to power imbalances in who controls land, production, distribution, pricing and policy direction. Civic participation must exceed procedural consultation. It must enable communities to act as organised rights-holders.
- Civic mobilisation is key to ensuring government accountability regarding the right to food at all levels. Movements and civil society organisations can engage with government structures via dialogue, protest, litigation as well as policy interventions.

- Mobilisation gains depth and legitimacy when it advances concrete alternatives in support of food sovereignty. Activities such as agroecology hubs, farmer support, and farmers' markets help communities experience the right to food as a lived reality.

Recommendations:

- Recognise and support farmer organisations, movements and civil society organisations for their important role in realising the right to food. They must be included in all food-related policy and governance processes, at all levels.
- Strengthen public accountability mechanisms, including public hearings and civic oversight. This includes establishing national and municipal monitoring systems to assess whether the right to food is being realised and developing a coordinated national legislative framework for food system governance
- Halt privatisation of the basic resources and infrastructure that contribute to the right to food (land, water, etc.) and ensure that processes for Free, Prior and Informed Consent are respected.

Theme 8 - Climate change and the South African food system

Key points:

- Climate impacts, which are already disrupting multiple dimensions of the food system, will have important implications for meeting the right to food. The food system is both a major contributor to climate change and highly vulnerable to its impacts, with Southern Africa already facing warming at close to twice the global average.
- South Africa is a water-scarce country projected to experience increasingly unreliable rainfall under climate change, with rising temperatures accelerating evaporation and altering rainfall patterns. This exposure is further compounded by declining soil organic matter and deteriorating soil structure across large areas of cultivated land, which reduce water retention and increase drought sensitivity. Maize is South Africa's major staple, yet it is also the most vulnerable to climate impacts, which threatens domestic and regional food supplies, with shortages leading to food price increases. The globalised South African food system is also exposed to the effects of climate shocks in other regions, such as through the transmission of price spikes. Market concentration amplifies climate risk because of centralisation.
- These biophysical risks are amplified by dominant farming models that depend on synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and predictable weather patterns. Such input-intensive systems reduce ecological resilience and leave producers especially vulnerable to climatic shocks. These shocks also interact with existing social relations. Farm workers are exposed to weather extremes, and smallholder farmers, the majority already marginalised, are further hit by extreme weather events like drought, which also deepens agrarian inequality in relation to better resourced commercial farmers. Without appropriate mitigation and adaptation, the climate crisis will continue to intensify existing patterns of food insecurity and inequality.

Recommendations

- Current agricultural policy responses remain largely focused on increasing production rather than building resilience and addressing structural vulnerability. Both climate and agricultural policy must confront this reality. Climate change must be recognised as a structural driver of food insecurity and a direct threat to the Constitutional right to food.
- Fully integrate the food system (not just agriculture) into climate mitigation and adaptation planning and policy within a just transition framework that also strengthens decent work, climate resilience, and the care economy across the food system for adaptation.
- In agriculture, prioritise climate-resilient land use and agroecology (including realigning incentives away from industrial and high-input specialised farming to regenerative mixed

systems), develop a national small-scale farmer climate adaptation strategy and a climate resilience fund for small-scale farmers, and launch a national soil restoration programme.

Theme 9 - Gender as a Cross-Cutting Vector in Advancing the Right to Food

Key points:

- The right to sufficient food, protected under Section 27(1)(b) of the Constitution is inseparable from broader questions of power, inequality, and structural exclusion. Gender functions as a cross-cutting vector shaping both vulnerability to food insecurity and the capacity to claim rights. Women, particularly Black African women in rural, peri-urban, and informal settlement contexts, bear disproportionate responsibility for food provisioning while facing systemic barriers to land ownership, income, productive resources, and decision-making power. Gender must therefore be understood as a structural determinant of rights violations and rights realisation. Female-headed households also experience significantly higher rates of food insecurity and poverty.
- Land access remains foundational to the substantive realisation of the right to food. In South Africa's historically racialised and gendered agrarian structure, women's land access continues to be mediated by discriminatory customary practices, bureaucratic gatekeeping, and the absence of consistently implemented gender-responsive land reform frameworks.
- Women are overrepresented in informal food economies, including street vending and small-scale production, yet remain excluded from formal value chains dominated by large corporate actors.

Recommendations:

- South Africa's food system transformation must centre women small-scale producers through secure land rights, agroecological investment, seed sovereignty, fair market access, and full implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) within a rights-based governance framework.
- Gender-responsive land reform must move beyond formal equality toward redistributive justice. Land reform must prioritise women's independent land rights, not derivative access through male relatives.
- National food system governance must ensure meaningful participation of grassroots women's movements beyond symbolic consultation.
- Provide dedicated support for women's participation in agro-processing and value chains.

Theme 10 - Child Hunger and Malnutrition

Key points:

- The first 1000 days (pregnancy through the first two years) are a limited window for building healthy bodies and brains. This period constitutes the 270 days of pregnancy and the 730 days of the child's first 2 years of life. Once lost to neglect, the country's human development index regresses. Poor maternal nutrition, barriers that prevent mothers from breast-feeding, the low level of the child-support grant, poor coverage of nutritional support for early childhood development centres and lack of any food interventions for children too young for ECDs leave many children vulnerable during the first 1000 days.

- South Africa’s children are part of the simultaneous crisis of undernutrition (stunting and wasting), micronutrient deficiencies (hidden hunger), and rising obesity due to a reliance on nutrient-poor, highly processed "poverty foods".
- The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) is hampered by centralized procurement, payment delays, and inadequate infrastructure. Despite nutritional guidelines, many NSNP meals fall short of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for energy and essential micronutrients.

Recommendations:

- Adjust the Child Support Grant to align with or exceed the food poverty line to ensure caregivers can buy sufficient food of adequate quality.
- Activate South Africa’s Food Security and Nutrition Council to allow for intersectoral collaboration, an evidence-informed food security system that serves the youngest and most vulnerable people of South Africa, and a robust monitoring system to track and inform programme planners and implementers of progress.
- Improve maternal and infant nutrition through a maternal support grant, expanded maternity leave provisions, and increased access to UIF, especially for informal sector workers.
- Evaluate and then strengthen the NSNP and ensure that meals prioritise healthy, locally-sourced, agroecological produce, including indigenous ingredients. The establishment of agroecological school gardens and their incorporation into the curriculum should also be prioritised. Enforce strict bans on advertising ultra-processed and fast foods to children to curb the obesity crisis. Empower School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to mandate strict nutritional and food safety guidelines for tuck shops and surrounding vendors.

B) Theme 1: The structural dynamics and economic factors that perpetuate hunger and systemic exclusions, despite national food sufficiency

Introduction

This section considers key economic patterns in the South African food system that relate to food security trends and the achievement of the right to food. It traces notable elements in the historical creation of hunger and malnutrition as entrenched features of South African society to the present, and then turns to some of the contemporary economic dynamics within which patterns of food insecurity and hunger exist and persist. In this regard, given that almost all households depend on markets for all or much of their food consumption, food insecurity today can be seen as driven by two key elements: food prices and incomes, which together shape the affordability of food. The section therefore gives a broad overview of the economics of the post-1994 food system, and deepens this analysis with a focus on the economics of food prices. The subsequent sections focus on some of the key factors shaping the incomes of food insecure households, which are unemployment, wages, and social protection, and their relation to food insecurity. The final section provides initial recommendations to enhance the fairness of the economics of the food system, to create greater alignment with the achievement of the right to food and nutrition.

Historical factors

The causes of hunger historically and in the present are multiple and their respective weight contingent on the economic, social, and political dynamics relevant to particular contexts and historical periods. However, a few key historical factors underlying hunger should be highlighted. First, the link between the advent of colonialism and then apartheid and hunger and malnutrition, is that the latter came to be experienced overwhelmingly by the Black majority. In pre-colonial times, experiences of hunger coincided mainly with dry and lean seasons when natural and cultivated food supply was less abundant. However, colonial processes shifted the sources of hunger and malnutrition to predominantly systemic ones.[3] In this sense, and second, land dispossession was a major factor. Initially the purpose of land dispossession was to free up Black labour to build the colonial economy, while also developing a small class of 'progressive' Black farmers to supply colonial markets. This allowed for the development of a relatively productive and prosperous class of Black market-oriented peasants.[4] However, this class was subsequently greatly diminished as land dispossession intensified after the discovery of diamonds and later gold heightened the demand for cheap labour. Third, the alteration of social structures around agriculture further intensified hunger and malnutrition. For example, labour migration funnelled (mostly male) labour away from agriculture, which further reduced its productivity and increased the household and agricultural labour burden on women. Fourth, while in some other industrialised settings, the shift of peasantries into industrial working classes over time led to improved living standards and nutritional intake, the development of the South African economy on the basis of racialised land dispossession and low wage labour perpetuated hunger, malnutrition, and poor health.[5]

A final important feature concerns the economic structure of the agro-food system that was built through these processes up to and after 1994. Under apartheid, a comprehensive public and semi-public architecture of production, statutory marketing boards, and pricing support

[3] Wylie, D. (2001). *Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa.* Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia.

[4] Bundy, C. (1988). *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry (Second Edition).* London, Cape Town and Johannesburg: James Curry and David Philip.

[5] Jacobs, R. (2018). An urban proletariat with peasant characteristics: Land occupations and livestock raising in South Africa. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(5-6), 884-903; O'Laughlin, B. (2013). Land, labour and the production of affliction in rural southern Africa. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 13(1), 175-196.

was established to support white commercial agriculture and ensure a reliable supply of affordable food. With the economic crisis in agriculture in the 1980s, the government responded with a process of deregulation and liberalisation that intensified into and through the 1990s. This had a number of important implications for the economic structure of the post-apartheid food system, of which we highlight two here. Firstly, the privatisation of large cooperatives allowed decades of state support to transform into private market power, contributing to increased food system concentration in the post-apartheid era, and shifting the balance of power towards retailers and brand owners and away from consumers and producers.[6] Secondly, the Marketing of Agricultural Products Act 1996 dismantled the architecture that enabled the development of commercial agriculture and, together with the 2001 Strategic Plan for Agriculture, aimed to replace regulation and state coordination with the prioritisation of market forces.[7] While there would be land reform and producer support programmes for small and emerging Black farmers, there would not be the broader supportive ecosystem from which white commercial farmers had benefitted. Predictably, the pattern of 'agrarian dualism' developed through colonialism and apartheid has thus largely remained intact. The post-apartheid, market-centred food system, characterised by the paradox of extensive food insecurity amidst national food self-sufficiency, is one where externalised costs - such as environmental degradation and risks, including environmental shocks (often exacerbated by industrial farming practices) and food inflation - are socialised, while the returns from a highly centralised and concentrated agro-food complex remain privatised.

Concentration in the food system and its implications

An important economic pattern in the South African food system is concentration. Concentration in an industry or sector is concerned with the combination of the number of firms in that sector and their market share. The South African economy remains highly concentrated, with 69.5% of the 144 sectors examined by the Competition Commission highly concentrated. Notwithstanding notions of 'efficient' versus 'inefficient' concentration, higher levels of concentration is generally seen as a problem in so far as it increases the relevant individual firms' power over pricing and restricts wider participation in the food system and economy in terms of ownership, employment and livelihood patterns (SMEs are generally associated with greater employment benefits than large firms).[8] These two factors - unemployment and food prices - are two of the key drivers of food insecurity, and so concentration in the food system has critical bearing on the right to food.

Some value chains and segments of the food system have seen more concentration than others - notable segments are farm inputs (seeds, fertiliser, animal feed), grain processing (for human consumption and animal feed), bread, and poultry. Supermarket retail has also seen heightened patterns of concentration.[9] Clapp et al have identified three key problematic implications of corporate concentration and power in food systems.[10] First, dominant firms have high levels of market power, which gives them greater ability to charge higher prices, suppress wages, drive supplier prices down, and narrow livelihood opportunities. This is evident in the case of supermarkets in South Africa, whose ability to pressure suppliers on prices, volume requirements, and product specifications pose high entry barriers to smaller actors like small-scale farmers, thus limiting livelihood opportunities. The challenges of

[6] Greenberg, S. (2010). Contesting the Food System in South Africa: Issues and Opportunities. PLAAS Research Report No. 42. Belville: PLAAS.

[7] Jacobs, P. (2011). Agro-food market policy and food security in South Africa. *Development in Practice*, 21(4-5), 642-651.

[8] Hodge et al. (2021). Measuring concentration and participation in the South African economy: Levels and trends. Summary report of findings and recommendations. Pretoria: Competition Commission

[9] Hodge et al. op cit; Bowman, A. (2025). Supermarketisation, agro-industrial concentration and the food system's shrinking interstices: Insights from South African agro-processing. *Global Networks*, 25(2), 1-16.

[10] Clapp, J. et al. (2025). Corporate concentration and power matter for agency in food systems. *Food Policy*, 134, 1-15.

smallholder farmer inclusion in formal value chains have been widely documented and frequently point to these barriers, but it remains a prominent policy aspiration.[11] In addition to this, the continued expansion of corporate retail giants into rural and township markets is filling up the 'interstices' otherwise occupied by independent and informal retail, further marginalising smaller processors, retailers/traders, and smallholder producers. Second, corporate concentration gives dominant actors greater power to shape the conditions of the food system, including technologies and food environments, which can exclude actors and shape diets in ways out of line with public health and right to food imperatives. Third, dominant firms have greater power to shape policy and so the governance of food systems in their favour, which further shapes food systems in a particular direction and restricts deeper democratic participation in food system policy making. This is relevant in South Africa where after 1994 the state largely abdicated governance to the private sector, and so powerful corporate actors play an inordinate role in shaping consumer norms and food environments through marketing and their own food standards.[12]

These factors have entrenched a profound structural bias in the South African food landscape. Success metrics - from GDP contribution to export volumes - are calibrated for a high-input, large-scale industrial model, often at the expense of local resilience and food sovereignty. This 'industrial ecosystem' creates a feedback loop where policy, research, funding, and technology reinforce one another, making it very challenging for alternative systems (like agroecology or informal markets) to strengthen and make greater contributions to the resilience and fairness of the food system. The dynamics of deregulation and liberalisation also had important bearing on the economics of food prices in South Africa, which the next section turns to.

Economics of food prices and nutrition

Food prices in South Africa are shaped by several key drivers, each affecting the affordability and accessibility of food, especially for poor and low-income earners. Input costs have been identified as one of the major drivers of consumer food prices. With rising expenses for electricity, fuel, and other inputs directly increasing the price of food. SA-TIED research shows farmers largely bear rising input costs such as fertiliser and fuel, because unlike more powerful buyers like processors, they cannot fully pass these costs on.This results in significant margin pressures for farmers, highlighting the price-cost squeeze they face in the food supply chain, while more powerful actors in processing and retail can pass cost pressures on to consumers in order to maintain their margins (see more below).[13]

Market power and corporate concentration within the food system further influence prices, as a few large companies often control significant portions of the supply chain, limiting competition and creating barriers for smaller entrants. Policy decisions, such as regulations and subsidies, can influence food market dynamics and the actions of different supply chain actors. Without effective oversight, the large market participants can push compliance costs onto consumers and increase prices to their benefit. As a result, policy changes may impact consumer food prices, affecting affordability and access.

Market shocks like sudden changes in global prices or disruptions can translate into the domestic context and raise consumer costs. However, external shocks are also mediated

[11] Bowman, op cit.; Bennie, A. and Bowman, A. (2024). The Beef with Climate Change: Growth, Equity, and a Just Transition in the Beef Sector in South Africa. Prepared for the Tiny Beam Fund. Johannesburg: Institute for Economic Justice.

[12] van Reenen, N., Matomane, L., and Dunstan, C. (2025). The Drivers of Food Price Inflation in South Africa. Working paper 276.

[13] Adeniyi, D., Losch, D. and Adelle, C. (2021). Investigating the South African food security paradox: A systematic review of food system governance in South Africa.' Food Security SA Working Paper Series. Working Paper 009.

through domestic patterns of market power. For example, after the price shocks from 2022, although international wheat prices fell by 9.7% between July 2024 and July 2025, domestic prices increased by 7.9%.[14] This discrepancy may indicate factors like anti-competitive behaviour or market power or substantial barriers to entry within the food system, which could allow certain entities to control prices or profit margins.

Food prices are also impacted by bottlenecks and barriers to entry within food value chains that often stem from high input costs, limited access to finance, and dominance by large corporations. These factors restrict the ability of new or smaller players to participate fully, stifles innovation, and limits the diversity of food available in the market. Concentration within the food system amplifies these challenges, reducing competition and making it harder for affordable options to reach consumers. Linked to cost-price drivers of higher food prices, recent research finds that food price inflation in South Africa is primarily driven by supply-push factors – exchange rate movements, global food prices, and electricity and fuel prices. Importantly, predominant processors, manufacturers, and retailers pass these on to consumers.[15] This occurs in a pattern of larger differences between what farms get paid and prices in stores, and growing margins in processing and retail.[16]

These drivers have a disproportionate impact on poor and lower-income groups. As production costs rise, often linked to market concentration, access to nutritious food becomes more difficult. Smallholder farmers, who lack the financial resources to absorb price increases or invest in new technologies, are particularly vulnerable. This can lead to reduced planting and lower yields, further tightening supply and pushing prices higher for consumers. For many, the result is less money available for food after paying for essential expenses such as transport and electricity, increasing the risk of food insecurity.

It is critical to acknowledge that not only does rising food prices put nutrition security further in jeopardy, but that the poor are disproportionately impacted. This is because these households spend a larger share of their income on basic necessities like food, so even modest price hikes significantly impact their ability to afford healthy and nutritious options. For example, when the food basket of 28 items that the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC) tracks showed an 11.8% price increase between April 2023 and April 2022, this increased the cost of food as a share of average monthly income for the poorest 30% of the population by 8%, from 67% to almost 75%. In contrast, it only increased the share spent by the wealthiest 20% by 0.5%, from 3.7% to 4.2%.[17] The unequal impact of rising food prices is thus stark.

This also forces difficult choices on these households between spending on food, housing, transport and other essentials, making it even harder to maintain a nutritious diet and overall well-being. They have to adapt through, for instance, buying cheaper foods that are filling but have less nutritional value.[18] This can further contribute to undernourishment or overweight. Malnutrition has serious economic effects. It can cause child stunting (low height for age), and limits their physical and mental development. This impacts close to 29% of children under the age of five, equivalent to more than 1.5 million children[19]. This affects their learning and future job opportunities. For adults, poor nutrition can lower productivity and reduce earnings. The

[14] NAMC, (2025). Food And Input Cost. Issue 02. https://www.namc.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/NAMC2-Food-and-Input-Cost-Report-Q2-September-2025-002.pdf

[15] Van Reenen, N. et al. (2025). The drivers of food price inflation in South Africa. SA-TIED, Working Paper 276.

[16] BusinessTech. (2023, 28 March). Consumers hit by unjustified price hikes for staple foods in South Africa. https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/675933/consumers-hit-by-unjustified-price-hikes-for-staple-foods-in-south-africa/

[17] NAMC., Food Cost Review 2023 https://www.namc.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Food-Cost-Review-2023-FINAL.pdf

[18] PMBEJD. 2025 (July). Household food affordability index. Pietermaritzburg: PMBEJD.

[19] South African Early Childhood Review 2024, https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ECR-Chapters-3.pdf

country also faces higher health care costs because more people need treatment for problems linked to malnutrition. In the long run, malnutrition therefore has significant implications for the economy and inequality.

When discussing the impacts of food prices on nutrition, it is important to consider it in relation to other household costs as well. Nutrition is also impacted by the widening gap between household income and the rising costs of essential services such as electricity and transport. Using Pietermaritzburg-based data as an example, a worker's monthly wage of R4 836,72 is heavily eroded by electricity and transport expenses, which alone consume 59.2% of their income (R2 861,85). This leaves only R1 974,87 for food and all other necessities, yet the cost of a minimum nutritional food basket for a family of four far exceeds this remainder. The reality is that food is often purchased only after mandatory payments for electricity and transport, forcing families to make difficult trade-offs and frequently underspend on nutrition. Increases in costs like for electricity therefore negatively impact nutrition. amandla.mobi provides the voices of those impacted by rising food prices and other costs. For instance:

"Food prices are too high in a way that R1000 groceries is no longer enough food for a family of two. When you think you covered all during the month, you will lack things like bread and other basic food." -Semakaleng

"In order to afford food, I had to stop taking taxis to work. Now I have to walk to work because food is so expensive." -Amelia

"The moment I saw the 5kg maize meal priced to be around R50, I realised prices have gone up for real. It is difficult for families surviving on the grant only. You'll also find that people live with family. How will they survive since we don't even have jobs?" -Nondumiso

Community perspectives such as these further shed light on the harsh choices faced by households as the cost of living, in terms of food, transport, electricity, and basic living conditions, continues to rise. Targeted interventions that increase the social wage are therefore important to bridge the food affordability gap.

Despite efforts like social grants and VAT exemptions, high rates of stunting and malnutrition persist. These demand-side interventions help but fail to fully bridge the affordability gap, and zero-rating food often benefits the wealthy in terms of Rand value more than the poor.[20] To truly tackle food insecurity, South Africa must urgently shift focus towards supply-side solutions as well, discussed in the final sub-section on solutions.

Food system economics, wages, and food insecurity

Political democratisation and shifting economics of the food system post-1994 have played a key role in (re)shaping conditions of work and wages in the food system, with notable implications for food security of those concerned. Here we focus on the case of farm work, which has historically been one of the most socially oppressive and low-paid forms of work in the South African economy.

For commercial farmers under cost-price pressures (due to very little influence over the cost of inputs, which is also one of the most concentrated sectors in the food system) and market prices for output, wages are one of the costs they have greater ability to manage. The economic pressures on commercial farmers behind contemporary labour patterns have a number of sources, including the liberalisation and further globalisation of the food system. The power of retailers domestically and in export destination markets (in the context of the

[20] Badernhost, G. (2024). Expanding the list of zero-rated foodstuffs: Will it really benefit the poor? Tax & Exchange Control 2024.

intensified export focus post-1994) has allowed them to accrue greater shares of value at the expense of farmers, and so while permanent farm workers have seen slow improvements in their wages over time, farmers have responded by adjusting labour costs through casualisation and greater employment of seasonal labour, and so a decline in overall permanent employment. Hence, while a number of agricultural sub-sectors are some of the most labour intensive in the economy, worker remuneration in agriculture accounts for only a quarter of sectoral value added, compared to half for the rest of the economy.[21] These labour and associated wage patterns have far-reaching implications for food security of farm workers. With farm work overall being one of the lowest paid sectors in the economy, farm worker households in general experience some of the highest levels of food insecurity in the country.[22] These patterns worsen in relation to sub-sector and types of work. Research with seasonal farmworkers in the Northern Cape Province found that 88% of respondents experienced severe food insecurity during the low employment winter period, reducing to 49% (a still extreme level) during the summer harvest.[23]

Social policy and food insecurity

In a context of persistent poverty, the prevailing economics of the food system, and the impacts discussed above, social policy has an important role to play in supporting access to nutritious food. This is particularly important in relation to child nutrition, where child stunting is currently close to 29%, 3 million children live in households that report child hunger, and cases of severe acute malnutrition in children under 5 increased by 33% between 2020 and 2022.[24]

While extensive research has shown the positive impacts of the Child Support Grant (CSG) and the Older Persons Grant (OPG) on nutrition, and have kept 9.2 million people out of extreme poverty, they have in themselves not been able to address the extent of the poverty and food insecurity crisis. The food poverty line set by Statistics South Africa is currently at R777 per month, while in January 2026 the average cost of feeding a child a basic nutritious diet was R948.18. However, apart from the other costs of raising a child, the current value of the child support grant of R560 per child per month is 28% below the food poverty line and 41% below the cost of a nutritious diet for a child.[25] The current value of the grants cannot eradicate hunger. This is supported by the Children's Institute's findings that low grant amounts significantly undermine the positive characteristics of South Africa's social protection system and would need to increase to reduce both inequality and poverty.[26] A range of solutions are therefore needed, encompassing economic reform, supply and demand side interventions, social policy, and crafting of alternative economic patterns in the food system.

Theme 1: Recommendations

Interventions should encompass both economic reform and social policy, which combined can advance the transformations required to steer food system dynamics and outcomes towards the right to food. Key actions would include:

- Raising the CSG to at least the food poverty line. This would better enable care givers to cover the cost of a basic nutritious diet per child, and modelling has shown that it would

[21] Visser, M. and Ferrer, S. (2015). Farm Workers' Living and Working Conditions in South Africa: Key trends, emergent issues, and underlying and structural problems'. International Labour Organization. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/documents/publication/wcms_385959.pdf.

[22] Claasen, N. and Lemke, L. 2019. Strong ties, weak actors? Social networks and food security among farm workers in South Africa. *Food Security*, 11, 417-430.

[23] Devereux, S. and Tavener-Smith, L. 2019. Seasonal food insecurity among farm workers in the Northern Cape, South Africa. *Nutrients*, 11, 1-21.

[24] https://www.childrencount.uct.ac.za/domain.php?domain=4

[25] PMBEJD. 2026. Household Affordability Index January 2026.

[26] Hall, K. et al. 2023. Reducing Child Poverty: A review of child poverty and the value of the Child Support Grant. Children's Institute, Department of Social Development, National Development Agency, SASSA.

increase uptake and so cover more children, further contributing positively to national child nutrition patterns.[27] Given that child nutrition begins with pregnancy, the CSG should start with pregnancy as a maternity benefit grant.

- Transitioning the social relief of distress (SRD) grant into a universal basic income initially set at at least the food poverty line, and progressively expanded to the upper bound poverty line. This would ensure that everyone is at least able to meet their basic dietary needs, would redistribute wealth, and draw millions into the economy.
- Ensuring that large supermarkets reduce the gap between supermarket prices and farm gate prices of essential food items such as eggs, meat, milk, fruit, vegetables, and bread. Businesses that package and process food and basic necessities should do the same. They can afford to do this while paying farmers a fair price and workers a decent wage, while remaining profitable.
- Taking steps where big processors, manufacturers, and retailers are required by the state to provide data and information on their pricing through the supply chain. This transparency is necessary to allow for greater public scrutiny and would better enable regulators to monitor prices more thoroughly and inform necessary action.[28]
- Increasing the fines for businesses that profiteer and do more to protect consumers. The Presidency must take urgent action to reduce the high cost of living by working with relevant bodies, such as the Department of Trade and Industry, to strengthen the powers and mandate of the Competition Commission, Competition Tribunal, and other public institutions tasked with protecting consumers.
- Furthering the range of public policy options for influencing the economics of the food system and stabilising and lowering food prices. This can include exploring the feasibility of a national food buffer stock system to mitigate against price volatility emanating from global shocks and climate impacts, and implemented in a complementary way with other interventions like competition policy, standard setting and subsidies for climate resilient agricultural production and food distribution networks, and strategic use of tariffs to stabilise short run domestic supply and prices. It can also involve learning from examples of publicly-run grocery stores to add competition to the retail sector, and which can provide nutritious foods at lower costs and expand market outlets for producers. Interventions that target cost structures and pricing behaviour in processing, manufacturing, and retail are also necessary.[29]
- Strengthening more localised food systems is also an important intervention that can help achieve multiple positives linking livelihood and job creation, public procurement and incentives and support for ecologically friendly production (including composting, rainwater harvesting, and organic pest control), local distribution and marketing channels, social and health policy, and climate resilience. Interventions like this allowed places like Belo Horizonte in Brazil to embed economic dynamics of local food systems with social and environmental goals and achieve Zero Hunger.[30]

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[27] IEJ. (2026, February). Our message to the President ahead of SONA: The improved economic environment is an opportunity…use it or lose it. Media Statement.; Hall et al. op cit.

[28] GrainSA (2026), which acts in the interests of commercial farmers, has also made this call: https://www.grainsa.co.za/news-headlines/press-releases/grain-sa-warns-wheat-crisis-is-structural---calls-for-urgent-policy-and-value-chain-intervention

[29] Bennie, A. et al. (2025). Staple food price trends in South Africa: A case for buffer stocks? Johannesburg: Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ); Weber, I. et al. (2025). Food Price Stabilization in an Age of Overlapping Emergencies: The case for multilevel buffer stocks. For G20 Food Security Task Force. Working Paper, University of Massachusetts Amherst; GrainSA op cit.; Patel, R. (2025, 20 August). Op-ed: Publicly-run grocery stores already exist and run well. We need more. *Civil Eats.* *https://civileats.com/2025/08/20/op-ed-public-grocery-stores-already-exist-and-work-well-we-need-more/*

[30] Competition Commission. (2021). Essential food report shows increasing concentration and challenges for small-scale farmers. Media Statement; Lappe, F.M. (2019, 29 January). This city made access to food a right of citizenship. *Yes! Magazine.* *https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/food-everyone/2019/01/29/this-city-made-access-to-food-a-right-of-citizenship*

C) Theme 2: The concentration of power in the food value chain and its impact on access, affordability, and nutritional quality

"[They] who feed you control you" – Thomas Sankara

The challenge

Historically, a highly dualistic and inequitable structure has shaped the commercial food system in South Africa along racial lines. On the one side, a well-supported white commercial sector, both in farming and along supply chains, dominated the market. In most (though not all) sectors, ownership and control was structured by the statutory power granted to white farmer-owned cooperatives and statutory marketing channels such as the single channel marketing boards.[31] Private sector mining and industrial conglomerates owned and controlled key nodes in the food system, especially in inputs, manufacturing and later in retail.[32] Super-exploitation of black labour under apartheid underpinned profitability.[33]

On the other side, there were many sub-subsistence activities in the bantustans and homelands, with severely limited support or access to resources for the black majority, with almost no space for participation in supply chain enterprises. This fundamental structure has changed little in the post-apartheid period. Corporate concentration has deepened after 1994, although on a more "free market" basis.

There was already pressure to reform the governance and control structures prior to the end of apartheid. Larger producers were pushing for greater freedom in markets and to open the way for private control over exports. Coming into power, the African National Congress (ANC) accepted the advice of the commercial farming lobby and the World Bank, and carried forward the late apartheid programme of deregulation, trade liberalisation, privatisation of farmer cooperatives, and dismantling of the marketing boards.[34]

Information on food system concentration is fragmented, with limited research, mainly focusing on individual sectors or elements of sectors over the years. But there is evidence that concentration is particularly high in key nodes such as agricultural inputs (in particular commercial seed and pesticides, and imported agricultural machinery), poultry breeding stock and production, cattle feedlots, some sectors of food manufacturing (bakery products, sugar and sugar products, beverages), ocean (marine) fisheries, consumer food service and retail, all sectors where five or fewer companies dominate the markets.[35]

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[31] Bayley, B. (2000). "A Revolution in the Market: The Deregulation of South African Agriculture". Monograph. Oxford Policy Management, Oxford (www.opml.co.uk/docs); World Bank. 1994. South African agriculture: Structure, performance and options for the future. Discussion Paper 6.Pretoria: World Bank Southern Africa Department

[32] Davies, R., O'Meara, D. and Dlamini, S. (1984). *The struggle for South Africa: A Reference Guide to movements, organisations and institutions Vol 1*. Zed Books, London/New Jersey.

[33] Marcus, T. (1989). *Modernising super-exploitation: Restructuring South African agriculture*. Zed Books, London/New Jersey.

[34] Bayley, op cit.; Bernstein, H. (2013). "Commercial agriculture in South Africa since 1994: 'Natural, simply capitalism'", *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol 13 No 1, pp.23-46.

[35] Greenberg, S. (2017). 'Corporate power in the agro-food system and the consumer food environment in South Africa', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44:2, pp.467-496; African Centre for Biodiversity (2017). "The three agricultural input mega-mergers: Grim reapers of South Africa's food and farming systems", ACB, Johannesburg; Goga, S. and Roberts, S. (2023). "Multinationals and poultry value chains in South Africa, Zambia and Malawi", CCRED Working Paper 2023/11, Centre for Competition, Regulation and Economic Development, Johannesburg; Statistics South Africa (2023), "Manufacturing industry: Financial, 2021", Report No. 30-02-03 (2021), StatsSA, Pretoria; Statistics South Africa (2025). "Ocean (marine) fisheries and related services industry, 2023: Financial and production statistics", Report No. 13-00-01 (2023), StatsSA, Pretoria; Bowman, A. (2025).

Some of this is the result of global concentration, with large global mergers and acquisitions (M&A) filtering down into South Africa. But there is also active domestic M&A, as Competition Commission data reveals.[36] This includes corporate food retailers targeting smaller and less formal retail outlets in townships for acquisition to extend their footprint in these markets.[37]

Some nodes in the food system, such as some sectors in primary agricultural production, transport, and trade, do show a broad and diverse production base that offers a material base to build a more equitable system.

However, the bifurcated system (again, mainly along racial and gender lines) - of a few very large operators and many small operators with much less power - is evident even in these nodes. For example, although levels of ownership concentration are low in agricultural production, 0.6% of commercial farming units (237 units) accounted for a third of income in 2007,[38] and this share is likely to have increased in the subsequent years. The 2017 Census of Commercial Agriculture showed that 6.5% of the total number of commercial farms accounted for 67% of total income.[39]

Financialisation,[40] foreign acquisition of physical assets and ownership of "intellectual property," the latter which is licensed and for which royalties must be paid for use, have risen in the food system over the past 30 years.[41]

Some of the major corporations throughout the food system in South Africa are now majority or near-majority owned by entities incorporated outside the country.

Imports arising from liberalisation of trade in goods and services have meant the displacement of domestic production in key sectors such as wheat and poultry.

Foreign ownership means wealth extraction and loss of national-level ownership and control of strategic national resources. Together with rising food imports, this ultimately points to ceding of control of national food supply to others outside our country, posing a significant risk to national security and sovereignty, especially in a period of greater global uncertainty and threat we are entering now.

The digital economy, including artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and cloud computing is entering into the agriculture and food system. South Africa faces a deep digital divide,

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"Supermarketisation, agro-industrial concentration and the food system's shrinking interstices: Insights from South African agroprocessing", *Global Networks*, 25:e12521, https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12521

[36] See Competition Commission of South Africa merger and acquisition databases, https://www.compcom.co.za/reports/

[37] Jacobs, S. (2024). "The battle for South Africa's R180 billion spaza shop economy", *Daily Investor*, 25 June, https://dailyinvestor.com/retail/55433/the-battle-for-south-africas-r180-billion-spaza-shop-economy/

[38] Liebenberg, F. (2013). "South African agricultural production, productivity and research performance in the 20th century". PhD thesis, University of Pretoria.

[39] Statistics South Africa (2020). "Census of commercial agriculture 2017: Financial and production statistics", Report no 11-02-01, StatsSA, Pretoria, p.6

[40] Financialisation is defined as the proliferation of financial markets and assets, but also diversification of non-financial (e.g. industrial) companies into, and an increasing share of profits from, financial activities. See Ashman, S., Fine, B. and Newman, S. (2010). "The crisis in South Africa: Neoliberalism, financialisation and uneven and combined development", in L. Panitch, G. Albo and V. Chibber (eds) *Socialist Register 2011: The crisis this time*, Merlin Press, London, pp.174-195.

[41] Greenberg, S. (2017), op cit.

especially in rural areas and among women, due to low internet connectivity, limited digital skills, and unequal access to digital devices and infrastructure. These barriers make digital tools inaccessible to many.

Digital agriculture enables corporations to deploy digital agriculture services—from advisory tools to drones—often sourced from abroad—to collect, own, and profit from farm data. This raises concerns about unequal benefits, data ownership, and the marginalisation of local knowledge and farmer interests.

Data has become a valuable global commodity, with corporations, financial actors, governments, and international institutions competing to extract and monetise agricultural data.[42] Once farmers' on-farm data is aggregated, it effectively becomes corporate property—often held by foreign companies—leaving farmers without control or a share of the profits.

The growing dependence of farmers on proprietary platforms, digital advisory tools, and external inputs results in a profound loss of autonomy.[43] This dynamic further shifts power away from farmers and towards large agribusiness and technology corporations, effectively turning farmers into "digital labourers" who must pay to access the very data they generate.

The commercial food system continues to depend on low wages, extractivism and environmental degradation for profitability. These are not disconnected from one another, with the "Four Cheaps" of systematically undervalued food, labour power, energy and raw materials underpinning surplus extraction in the capitalist food regime since the earliest days.[44]

Lack of access to productive assets, like land and water or access to fishing areas, and the essential failure of programmes for the meaningful redistribution of productive assets over the past 30 years, pose obstacles to the necessary expansion and diversification of food production. Women face particular barriers to land access.

Corporate power manifests in the capture of food system governance. In a number of areas, the private sector and corporations have been given the responsibility for self-regulation e.g. commercial seed and pesticides, food safety, or worker's employment conditions. National standards may be set, but implementation and monitoring is largely ceded to private actors with sectional interests. Government is reactive, only responding after crises have already emerged.

Corporate lobbyists use their control of resources to lobby for watering down of regulations and laws that aim to protect consumers and promote healthy eating e.g. on the sugar tax, dietary guidelines, product formulation, product placement in supermarkets, or advertising restrictions. Many of these end up being voluntary guidelines that are routinely ignored in the interests of private profit. Corporations actively shape the consumer food environment through pricing, marketing and product formulation.

Commercial enterprises also exert informal power to control access to markets, especially along racial lines. The Competition Commission market inquiry into fresh produce markets

[42] Canfield, M. and Montenegro, M., 2023. "Governing food system data: Is the UN Committee on World Food Security up to the task?", https://globaldatajustice.org/gdj/2950/

[43] African Centre for Biodiversity 2023. "Financialisation, dematerialisation, digitalisation and distancing of Africa's agriculture: What future for small-scale farmers and their food and seed systems?", https://acbio.org.za/corporate-expansion/financialisation-digitalisation-africa-agriculture/

[44] Moore, J. 2015. *Capitalism in the web of life: Ecology and the accumulation of capital*. Verso, London/New York.

showed exertion of informal power by market agents through selective and differential credit extension and commission fees, agents buying from themselves in competition with farmers, and reserving produce for favoured buyers.[45]

Other examples of informal power include the use of quality standards by supermarkets to restrict access for black and smallholder farmers, long-term contracts for infrastructure and equipment that lock producers into single suppliers, inequitable staff incentives (e.g. training or educational opportunities), strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP suits) when legacy lock-ins are challenged, and "fronting" to capture grants and other resources meant for disadvantaged groups. These examples are mostly anecdotal precisely because they have never been effectively investigated.

Laws and regulations are designed for large-scale commercial operations, and are not always relevant or appropriate for smaller and less formal actors. This results in barriers to entry and restricted opportunities for economic participation.

Subsidies continue to support large commercial enterprises in agriculture, energy and mining despite the negative environmental impacts of these subsidies. This includes VAT zero rating for chemical inputs to commercial farmers, with the state estimated to forego approximately R3.2 billion in annual revenues through this policy.[46]

Corporate power shapes the discourse on food. Food security is considered as an individual, private responsibility. The suggestion is that there can be no change to the status quo, that corporations are all that is standing between the population and mass starvation. This is based on the apparent inevitability of economies of scale and commercialisation. The only role for smallholders or small enterprises is integration into existing corporate value chains, which usually results in "adverse incorporation", which can result in disempowering or inequitable participation.[47]

The deeper structural challenge is the entrenchment of food as a commodity, produced and circulated by private owners in interests of profit. The food system is structured to create passivity and dependency, which marginalises smaller scale producers and disempowers fragmented and atomised consumers.

Outcomes of the dominant corporate-industrial South African food system fall short across the dimensions of the functional core of production and distribution, the socio-economic context, and the environmental context. First and foremost, despite its apparent technical sophistication and global competitiveness, the commercial food system has failed to deliver the Constitutional right to food. Food insecurity and hunger remain at high levels that do not reflect the country's economic status.

This speaks to entrenched inequality, revealing poor socio-economic outcomes from the food system. Smallholder farmers, small-scale fishers, informal sector workers and consumers are marginalised. Low wages and precarious work continue to underpin commercial profitability. Environmental outcomes are equally poor, with the food system being the second largest source of greenhouse gases in South Africa after energy.

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[45] Competition Commission. (2025). "Fresh produce market inquiry: Final Report". Competition Commission, Pretoria.

[46] UNDP South Africa (2022). "The Impact of Subsidies and Incentives on South African Biodiversity. The Biodiversity Finance Initiative". UNDP, New York

[47] Hickey, S. and du Toit, A. (2007). "Adverse incorporation, social exclusion and chronic poverty", Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper 81, Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester.

Corporate-industrial food production methods are implicated in significant land degradation, water pollution and biodiversity loss.

There is a need for systemic change in the food system as part of wider changes required in the society and economy. The social contract in South Africa needs to be revisited, and the vast inequalities and power imbalances should be tackled head on and with urgency, within the food system and beyond.

Long term vision

- The long-term vision is of a diversified, adaptive and resilient agri-food system in which historically marginalised and dispossessed individuals and small- and medium-scale producers are an integral and far more prominent part of food production and distribution.
- Easily accessible local and informal markets are supported as important channels for the regular distribution of healthy, nutritious food to local populations.
- The public sector supports agroecological and smallholder farmers, small-scale fishers and supply line enterprises (upstream and downstream of primary production) through public procurement of inputs and food from these producers.
- The agrarian structure is more diversified, based on a rapid and meaningful redistribution of quality land and other natural resources, in particular to black, youth and women's ownership and control.
- A transition needs to be time-bound, of 7 to 10 years, converging on an agroecological food system across substantially all producers and value chain enterprises, large and small.

Theme 2: Recommendations

Corporate concentration and financialisation
- Restrict and regulate corporate concentration across food value chains, particularly in processing and retail, where dominant firms shape prices and consumer access.
- Establish a sovereign wealth fund paid for through a wealth tax on profits, turnover and cash surpluses being held in reserve above a defined threshold.

Super-exploitation and extractivism
- Social wage including universal basic income grant
- Food reserves to be made available as needed to meet objective of right to food for all
- Place a ceiling on the gap between highest and lowest wages in any enterprise operating in SA
- Strengthen labour laws and place much greater emphasis on proactive enforcement

Redistribution of resources
- Rapid redistribution of productive resources (land, water, seed, means of production) and provision of appropriate and comprehensive support to facilitate effective use
- Set time-bound targets for redistribution, especially of land

Digital technologies
- Individuals, especially food producers and marginalised communities operating in the food system, maintain control over their own data and reduce their dependence on foreign digital systems, supported in part by digital public goods
- The government has a responsibility to ensure data justice, protect national data stored abroad, regulate foundational datasets, prevent the privatisation of public data, and ensure that digitalisation is governed by human rights principles.

- To avoid further marginalising vulnerable groups, the South African government must strengthen education, address the digital divide, protect those displaced by technological shifts, and avoid using public funds to enable private proprietary systems.

Governance
- Adopt democratic, participatory and inclusive multi-level and multi-actor governance mechanisms to guide the food system towards realising the right to food as core objective of public policy
- Statutory involvement of private sector and relevant government departments and entities to hold them to account for decisions they make
- Support for effective democratic representation and participation of the mass of the population in food systems governance and decision-making, in particular capacity building and timely provision of necessary information, make information accessible through use of local languages and channels for distribution of information, material resources to assist communities to deliberate and participate effectively
- Investigate insidious informal means of blocking access to economic participation, especially on the basis of race.

Laws and regulations
- Comprehensive review of all laws, policies, programmes, regulations relating to food system across multiple sectors/functional areas – identify priority areas for intervention – legal and policy alignment based on centrality of realisation of right to food
- Redirect environmentally harmful subsidies from large commercial enterprises towards support for environmentally friendly economic practices in line with the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Global Biodiversity Framework Target 18,[48] and the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 12c[49]. Incorporate these targets into the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) and agricultural policies and plans.
- Phase out the zero rating of chemical inputs to commercial agriculture and redirect the savings towards supporting a role for smallholder farmers in a more diversified production system.

Capitalist logic underpinning food production and distribution
- In the longer term there is need to break with the capitalist logic of food as a commodity rather than a right. This is part of the larger struggle for economic democratisation in South Africa, the region and globally. Interventions should be tailored to move the production and distribution of food in this direction.
- Reorient food system objectives away from profit and toward meeting nutritional and social needs.
- Prioritise the production of healthy staple foods for domestic consumption.
- Redistribute value across food chains, particularly to workers, informal traders, smallholder farmers and small-scale fishers through scientific research of value distribution throughout supply chains, and democratic governance to identify a more equitable distribution of value that permits supply chains to continue functioning.
- Break up monopolies or oligopolies and decentralise ownership and control across the food system.
- Promote food sovereignty through policies that strengthen community control over production, distribution and consumption.
- Use public procurement to support small and medium enterprises to improve access to nutritious food in schools, clinics and community facilities.

[48] Convention on Biological Diversity (2022). “Kunming—Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework”, CBD/COP/DEC/15/4
[49] https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal12#targets_and_indicators

D) Theme 3: The link between land access, tenure security, and food insecurity, especially for women, smallholder, and communal farmers

Introduction

Land and the right to food are intrinsically linked. Addressing land inequity is essential for restoring dignity, reducing inequality, and ensuring that marginalised groups have access to land and the means to feed themselves. Secure access to land is therefore critical to the right to food, making land reform an urgent imperative.

South Africa's Constitution strongly commits national institutions to respect, protect and strengthen the land rights of women and men, gender equity, and equitable access to and distribution of land. Section 25 of the Constitution known as the 'Property Clause' extends and protects land and property rights, and allows for expropriation of land. Sections 25(5), (6), (7) and (9) guarantee (a) equitable access to land through redistribution; and (b) restitution to those whose rights were historically dispossessed as a result of racial discrimination.

Implementation has not been equal to intention. There is widespread dissatisfaction that these rights are not being adequately promoted, enforced and protected, and land redistribution has not been effectively implemented. Section 25 requires the balancing of one right against another, and requires protection of existing property rights, which can result in ambiguity, as some rights are stronger in law than others since the legal system reflects a hierarchy of rights inherited from the previous order. This ambiguity can be politically exploited to either block land redistribution or to advance ideas in favour of radical seizures, neither of which advances equity or justice. There is clear evidence that the existing tools available for land reform have not been used to maximum efficiency or effectiveness, with the result that the land reform programme has been highly flawed, slow and ineffectual.

A particular defect has been poor restructuring and support of rural land distribution to smallholder land uses, thus weak application support for small holders. White-owned land (which is the majority of land available for redistribution) has been geared towards concentration of ownership and large-scale, highly capitalised agriculture and agri-processing and these land complexes are still in place. Urban land allocation has been poor and not met the rising rate of urbanisation.

Land and agrarian reform are the foundation of South Africa's current food and related health crisis. The structures that govern land ownership, agricultural production, and food distribution are not neutral, they are a direct legacy of colonial and apartheid-era dispossession. These systems were designed to concentrate land and agricultural power in the hands of a small minority. These historic patterns continue to shape the present where a limited number of actors, primarily white landowners, alongside segments of black political elite and ultra-rich, retain disproportionate control over land and the agricultural sector. This persistent inequality undermines the ability of the majority of South Africans to produce or access sufficient food.

Within this system, land management is still driven by market-based mechanisms that prioritise export markets and profit, rather than local food needs. As a result, the agricultural sector is structured to serve global and commercial interests, while affordable, nutritious food remains inaccessible for many South Africans. The dominance of a profit-oriented agrarian

model, combined with deeply unequal land ownership patterns, has produced a food system in which hunger persists despite the country's national capacity to produce food.

Key Challenges

a) Land Access

- Land reform in South Africa has not achieved its intended transformative goals, and the scale of redistribution remains extremely limited. Despite decades of policy commitments, very little land has been transferred to historically dispossessed communities. The system continues to reflect the deep inequalities of the past, leaving the majority without meaningful access to productive land. The reliance on a market-driven land redistribution model has entrenched these failures.

- Agricultural land, often concentrated in private ownership, remains inaccessible to poor households, effectively excluding the people that land reform was meant to empower. Where the government has intervened to provide land, the support has frequently been inadequate and misaligned with community needs.

- This systemic exclusion is illustrated in the Namaqua region, where land is physically available but not made accessible to local communities for either settlement or agricultural use. This withholding of land prevents households from producing their own food or developing sustainable livelihoods. As a result, communities remain trapped in chronic food insecurity, despite the existence of land that could otherwise support agricultural development and self-reliance.

- Key marginalised groups are affected in specific ways in this regard, for example Farm dwellers[50].
    - Farm dwellers, who in many instances have resided on farms for multiple generations, have limited protection from eviction and do not have sufficient access to land. Farm dwellers are one of the most marginalised and precarious social groupings in South Africa.
    - Almost one third of farm dweller households are food insecure[51]. A survey carried out in 2025 of 710 farm dweller households in the uMgungundlovu District of KwaZulu Natal found that over the past 12 months 35% of households were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food and ate only a few kinds of foods because of a lack of money or other resources. In addition, 31% of households reported that over the past 12 months they had to skip a meal or eat less than they thought they should because of a lack of money or other resources.

b) Tenure Security

- The lack of secure tenure remains one of the most destabilising challenges confronting vulnerable communities in ways that directly impact their ability to secure livelihoods and access food.

[50] The term Farm Dwellers encompasses farm occupiers, labour tenants and farm workers living on privately owned land that they do not own and is zoned agricultural land.

[51] Association for Rural Advancement. 2025. *Baseline survey of farm dweller households in the uMgungundlovu District of KwaZulu Natal*.

- For households that historically relied on small pieces of land to produce food for their own consumption, tenure insecurity has meant losing the space that once supported their nutrition and survival. As a result, rural people are placed in untenable social and economic circumstances, unable to maintain stable homes or sustain themselves with secure, protected land rights.

Lack of recordal of rights:

- Most occupiers on commercial farmland and communal land do not have certification, although they do have protected legal rights against arbitrary eviction, and on communal land, against arbitrary dispossession.
- There is a growing call for a 'land records system' to register off-register rights held by the majority of the population.
- Many households live on land without formal or secure rights, making them vulnerable to both legal and illegal evictions. These evictions contribute to the growth of informal settlements around rural towns; an occurrence once largely confined to urban areas but now a growing feature of rural landscapes.

Lack of decision-making power about land use and food production

- Farm dwellers' right to food cannot be separated from their right to land. Without addressing this link, the right to food will remain largely out of reach for people living and working on farms.
- Access to food is not simply about whether farmdwellers have the ability to produce it but rather whether they have permission from landowners to use the land. Simply put, it is about whether people are allowed to use the land on which they live on, if they are, how they are allowed to use it. On many farms, basic food-producing activities depend entirely on the permission of the landowner. These places farm dwellers in a position where a constitutional right is dependent on someone else's approval.
- While laws such as ESTA and the Labour Tenants Act protect farm dwellers to a certain extent, they do not adequately protect the use of land for survival. As a result, farm dwellers may have the right to remain on land but not the practical ability to feed themselves from it.

c) Smallholder and Commonage Farmers

- Tenure insecurity, inadequate land access, and structural barriers within municipal land systems collectively undermine the ability of rural households and emerging producers to sustain themselves.
- Smallholder and emerging farmers face additional constraints, including inconsistent and short-term tenure arrangements that prevent them from accessing financial or infrastructural support from the Department of Agriculture and related institutions.
- Their vulnerability is intensified by climate change, which imposes rising costs for water, crop protection, and livestock care with no government support.
- Tenure insecurity pushes farmers towards short-term coping strategies, such as planting drought- tolerant crops, while preventing long-term climate resilient investments like agroforestry that require secure rights.

- These challenges are worsened by serious water access and affordability issues.
- These pressures are compounded by competition with commercial farmers for land, resources, support and market access, pushing smallholders onto limited, infertile land with minimal investment or infrastructure. As a result, smallholder farming often cannot, on its own, provide food security for poor rural households, who must rely on grants, informal work and remittances to survive.
- In communal areas, insecure tenure and unilateral decision-making by traditional authorities further marginalise farmers.
- Rezoning of agricultural land for residential development diminishes land available for production.
- Within the commonage land system farmers encounter inconsistent policies, with rental fees varying widely from minimal to unaffordable, depending on the municipality. Commonage land is often located far from where communities live, creating transport barriers and increasing vulnerability to theft, while the land itself is frequently degraded after years of over grazing and suffers from a lack of fencing, water access and basic infrastructure. Historically prioritised for livestock farming, commonage systems tend to reinforce gendered access patterns, benefitting men who produce for market sale.

d) Women

- Women face profound gender inequality in land access, tenure security and agricultural support, which directly undermines their ability to produce food for their households and communities.
- Their exclusion from formal land rights means many rely on insecure arrangements tied to male partners, leaving them vulnerable to losing both shelter and productive space when a partner dies, leaves or is dismissed.
- Funding institutions seldom prioritise single women farmers, and women have very limited access to state reform programmes and commonage land, where direct lease agreements favour men and livestock-oriented production systems.
- As a result, women are pushed into backyard or small community gardens in schools, churches or vacant communal land, producing mostly for household and community rather than income, despite being central to local food provisioning.
- Their ability to farm is further constrained by harsh working conditions; women often lack protective gear and face intense heat stress and climate-related health risks, particularly in dry regions such as the Northern Cape.
- These challenges are compounded by women's heavy social burden, as many are single or widowed primary breadwinners supporting large households on small plots of land, sometimes more than 12 dependents, on inadequate pensions that cannot meet basic food needs.
- Women also frequently encounter unsafe and abusive conditions in farming environments, and when violations are reported their complaints are often dismissed. Additionally, many women are confined to contractual or seasonal farm work which provides neither stability nor pathways to land rights, further entrenching their exclusion from agricultural opportunities and limiting their capacity to secure food for their families.

Theme 3: Recommendations

Land Access:

- Sub-divide agricultural land to provide farmworkers and farm dwellers with secure and accessible land for settlement and production. Many small, well-located, properly supported farms, each responding to local conditions, can achieve significant food security impacts.
- Disposal of land held by the state for the benefit of farm dwellers to ensure access to land for small-scale agriculture.
- Expropriate land where commercial agricultural owners commit human rights violations, ensuring accountability within the sector.
- Use expropriation as a tool for human protection, particularly when communities face displacement.

Tenure Security

- Integrate farmworkers and farm dwellers into municipal planning, including proactive measures to prevent unlawful evictions.
- Strengthen legal protections for farmworkers and farm dwellers by expanding the scope of the Extension of Security Tenure Act (ESTA) to include pathways to permanent tenure and access to land through land reform.

- Target low hanging fruit – Farm Dwellers and Labour Tenants are already living on agricultural land and are already protected by laws in general application (i.e. the Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA) and the Land Reform Labour Tenants Act). Fast-track the transfer of ownership to these marginalised citizens and offer immediate post -settlement support that is informed by Agroecological principles.

Smallholder and Commonage Farmers

- DRDLR and CoGTA jointly align commonage policy, budgets and land management to ensure consistency of support.
- The government should allocate dedicated funds to rehabilitate and maintain commonage land. Improving infrastructure will enable better production and protect the land's long-term viability.
- Redistributed land must include basic infrastructure, long-term financing, and fertile, tested land. Without this support, beneficiaries are set up for failure.
- Policy to mandate that supermarkets source a fixed percentage of produce from smallholder farmers to ensure market inclusion.
- Amend the Communal Land Tenure Act to ensure democratic, transparent decision-making in communal land governance.
- Protect high-potential agricultural land with stricter zoning measures.
- Guarantee long term land use rights of 30+ years that enable investment in sustainable agriculture.
- Providing state-based subsidies and grants for long-term climate adaptation.
- Install community boreholes to provide safe, affordable water for households and gardens.

- Ensure spatial plans allocated areas for smallholdings on the edges of towns and cities, to facilitate collective marketing arrangements.

Women

- Elevate women in informal agriculture through pathways into formal land access and agricultural systems.
- Provide dedicated infrastructure and input support to women in both formal and informal agriculture.
- Prioritise women and youth for land access, ensuring allocation processes are equitable, accessible and responsive to historic patterns of exclusion, and recognising women's central roles as primary food providers.
- Reform reporting and funding system so that women can access support independently, without relying on patriarchal gatekeeping.

E) Theme 4: The Indivisibility of Rights

Introduction

- The interdependence or indivisibility of rights is a fundamental tenet of international human rights law.[52] This principle implies that human rights are interdependent and cannot be realised separately. According to paragraph 13 of the 1968 Proclamation of Teheran, adopted at the United Nations International Conference on Human Rights held in Tehran to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human rights are inseparable insofar as "it is impossible to fully realize civil and political rights without also enjoying economic, social and cultural rights."[53]

- The indivisibility of rights as it relates to the right to food is captured in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as both acknowledge the right to an adequate standard of living, which includes, amongst other, access to food, housing and social protection.[54]

- Drawing on Henry Shue's theory of "basic rights," certain rights including access to sufficient food are considered foundational because they are prerequisites for the enjoyment of all other rights.[55] Without adequate nutrition, individuals cannot meaningfully exercise rights to education, work, health, dignity or equality.

- The Bill of Rights in South Africa's Constitution as well as jurisprudence acknowledge the indivisibility of rights. Section 27(1)(b) guarantees access to sufficient food, although subject to progressive realisation, and section 28(1)(c) protects every child's right to basic nutrition, immediately realisable. These protections impose both negative and positive duties on the state. At a minimum, the state must refrain from actions that undermine access to food. It must also take reasonable, coordinated measures to facilitate and, where necessary, directly provide access to food through social assistance, school nutrition programmes, land reform, water access and agricultural support.

- The Constitutional Court confirmed that socio-economic rights require reasonable and coordinated government action,[56] and in *Khosa v Minister of Social Development* the court held that exclusions from social assistance must be justified.[57] In the more recent case of *Equal Education v. Minister of Basic Education*, the Gauteng High Court acknowledged that "a more undignified scenario than starvation of a child is unimaginable," and that a constitution committed to "human dignity, equality and freedom" cannot permit child hunger.[58]

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[52] Nickel, 'Rethinking Indivisibility: Towards a Theory of Supporting Relations between Human Rights' (2008) 30 Human Rights Quarterly 984, at 987–991.
[53] United Nations, Proclamation of Teheran: Final Act of the International on Human Rights, UN Doc. A/CONF.32/41(1968).
[54] International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted 16 December 1966, 993 UNTS 3, art 11(1).
[55] Amita Dhanda, 'The Parallel Play of Liberty and Subsistence' IACL-AIDC Blog (1 November 2022) https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/transformations/2022/11/1/the-parallel-play-of-liberty-and-subsistence.
[56] *Government of the Republic of South Africa v Grootboom [2000] ZACC 19; 2001 (1) SA 46 (CC).*
[57] *Khosa and Others v Minister of Social Development and Others [2004] ZACC 11; 2004 (6) SA 505 (CC).*
[58] Equal Education and others v. Department of Basic Education and others 2020, para 53.

- Similarly, ongoing litigation in relation to barriers to access to the Social Relief of Distress (SRD)[59] grant demonstrates that the rights to food and social assistance are not separate but rather reinforce one another. Social protection restrictions have a direct impact on recipients' access to food, proving that when one entitlement is restricted, others are put at imminent risk.

- Read collectively, this jurisprudence underscores that the right to food operates as a constitutional guarantee within South Africa's constitutional order (meaning it is legally protected by the Constitution, requiring the state to take steps to ensure access to food). This illustrates that social assistance is not optional welfare benefits, rather, they are procedures that ensure the right to food is fulfilled in situations where people are unable to obtain it on their own.

- Research emphasises how low-income and impoverished communities have consistently named spatial exclusion and land dispossession as some of the primary causes of hunger. Participants clarified that without access to arable land, people continue to rely on unstable wages and government assistance.[60] Land access was framed not merely as a mechanism for food production, but as central to the realisation of constitutional rights to dignity (section 10), access to sufficient food (section 27(1)(b)), and equitable access to land (section 25).

- Professional experience in environmental impact assessment, land-use planning, and regulatory compliance confirm that the right to food cannot be realized in isolation from other constitutional rights, particularly the rights to dignity, health, water, and a healthy environment.

- Communities are unable to produce food or sustain livelihoods without secure land tenure, access to water and ecologically sustainable systems. Food production and food safety are directly threatened by environmental degradation and poor spatial governance.

Challenges in the Realisation of the Right to Food

- A first and central challenge is the weakness of jurisprudence on the right to food. Although section 27(1)(b) of the Constitution guarantees that "everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water," South African courts have rarely provided a detailed, substantive interpretation of this provision as it relates to the right to food. As a result, there is limited judicial guidance on what "sufficient" food means in practice or on the precise scope of the state's obligations. The absence of clear jurisprudence weakens accountability and makes enforcement more difficult.

- Closely linked to this is the absence of framework legislation specifically regulating the right to food. Without a coherent legislative framework that clarifies institutional responsibilities, standards, and coordination mechanisms, implementation remains fragmented and reactive.

- Often viewed as a national or provincial matter, food security is rarely prioritized at a local government level, although food insecurity is experienced locally. Moreover, in some instances, municipal enforcement practices can negatively impact on the local food system, for example through the disruption of informal trade. Taken together,

[59] https://www.seri-sa.org/index.php/more-news/1429-litigation-update-pretoria-high-court-hands-down-a-judgment-in-the-srd-grant-court-case-enabling-millions-to-more-to-access-the-grant
[60] Food for Thought: Reflections on food (in)security. Laws, experiences, interventions", Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI) (2025).

these dynamics highlight both the positive obligations of the state (to plan, provide, and support access to food) and the negative obligations (to refrain from actions that exacerbate food insecurity), underscoring that the realization of the right to food requires coordinated action across all levels of government.

- A further structural challenge arises from the externalisation of environmental costs within South Africa's industrial food systems. Intensive livestock production consumes significant water and land resources and contributes to soil degradation and water pollution in several regions. Although retail prices may appear affordable, the environmental costs of water depletion, pollution and land degradation are not fully internalised. Instead, these costs are shifted onto communities through reduced access to clean water, environmental harm and long-term chronic illness.[61] This dynamic undermines the constitutional interdependence between the rights to food, water, health, dignity and a healthy environment. When environmental governance fails to regulate the cumulative impacts of intensive production systems, food security becomes precarious and inequitable. Vulnerable communities bear disproportionate exposure to degraded environments while simultaneously facing limited access to diverse and nutritious food options. In this way, fragmented environmental regulation and food policy contribute to structural food insecurity.

- The realisation of the right to food is inseparable from environmental sustainability, dignified livelihoods, and how animals are situated in the food system. Industrial animal agriculture, in particular, contributes to systemic inequality, ecological breakdown, and widespread animal suffering. A just transition to equitable, humane, and sustainable food systems is essential for realising constitutional rights. There is an urgent need to consider how human, environmental, and animal rights are intertwined within the food system. Addressing hunger requires transforming the structures that harm people, animals, and ecosystems alike. Furthermore, since industrial animal agriculture contributes significantly to South Africa's socio-ecological challenges, requires that animal welfare be a central consideration in agroecological transitions, rather than merely an ethical issue.

- In practice, environmental degradation and poor spatial planning routinely undermine food security. Communities living in polluted environments, water-scarce areas, or poorly serviced settlements face direct constraints on food production, food safety, and nutrition. Contaminated soil and water compromise subsistence farming and household food gardens, while inadequate waste management and weak enforcement of environmental regulations increase exposure to unsafe food environments. Environmental authorisations and development approvals often proceed without sufficient consideration of cumulative impacts on local food systems. Agricultural land is frequently rezoned or degraded without adequate assessment of long-term food security implications, particularly in peri-urban and rural areas where communities rely on informal or small-scale food production.

- From a regulatory perspective, fragmented governance remains a key barrier. Environmental, water, health, and food policies are implemented in silos, despite their clear interdependence. This results in gaps where no authority takes full responsibility for protecting people's rights to safe, nutritious, and accessible food. Municipalities, in particular, are under-supported yet play a decisive role through spatial planning, service provision, and environmental health enforcement. The erosion of dignity is evident in communities forced to rely on unsafe water, informal dumping sites, or nutritionally poor food options due to environmental and infrastructural neglect. These

[61] Joubert, L. (n.d.). Environmental impact of food systems. South Africa Online. https://southafrica.co.za/environmental-impact-food-systems.html

conditions represent systemic violations of interconnected constitutional rights, rather than isolated delivery failures.

- Furthermore, the right to food is not implemented in a manner that adequately addresses gender and vulnerability. Although the right is universal, women, children, persons with disabilities, and both rural and urban poor communities experience food insecurity in distinct and disproportionate ways. International law has not always fully reflected this reality. For example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) addresses women's access to adequate nutrition primarily in relation to pregnancy and maternal health.[62] While important, this framing risks reducing women's relationship to food to reproductive functions alone. In contrast, a more comprehensive and structurally grounded approach appears in Article 15 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. This provision recognises women's right to nutritious and adequate food and requires states to ensure access to clean drinking water, land, domestic fuel, food production resources, and appropriate supply and storage systems.[63] Significantly, this framework acknowledges women not only as food consumers but also as producers, preparers, and central actors in household food security. This broader recognition reflects lived experience. In many households including male-headed households women remain primarily responsible for sourcing, preparing, and managing food for children and other dependents. Yet they often lack equal access to land, water, income, and decision-making power. These structural inequalities mean that food insecurity has distinctly gendered dimensions. Without deliberate policy measures that address women's access to productive resources, spatial inclusion, and social protection, the right to food cannot be realised equitably.

Theme 4: Recommendations

- Adopt a Right-to-Food Framework Act to define "sufficient food," clarify government responsibilities, and establish coordination and reporting mechanisms (aligned with standards of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)).

- Establish a National Adequacy Standard defining sufficient food as nutritionally adequate, safe, culturally acceptable, physically accessible, and economically affordable. (Brazil's Organic Law on Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN), Law No. 11.346 of 15 September 2006 establishes a statutory definition of food and nutrition security as regular and permanent access to quality food, in sufficient quantity, without compromising other essential needs, and in a manner that is culturally appropriate and sustainable. This provides a clear example of a legislated national adequacy standard)[64]

- Strengthen jurisprudence through strategic litigation to clarify minimum core obligations and the meaning of "sufficient food."

- Address gender inequality explicitly, ensuring women's equal access to land, water, productive resources and protection of informal livelihoods, consistent with the

[62] CEDAW adds obligations to states in relation to supporting women's nutritional needs during pregnancy. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (adopted 18 December 1979, entered into force 3 September 1981) 1249 UNTS 1 (CEDAW), art 12(2).
[63] Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (adopted 11 July 2003, entered force25 November 2005) (Maputo Protocol), art 15(a).
[64] Government of Brazil, Organic Law on Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN), Law No. 11.346 of 15 September 2006 (establishing the National Food and Nutrition Security System – SISAN).

Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

- The right to food must be explicitly integrated into environmental decision-making, including Environmental Impact Assessment (EIAs), land-use approvals, and municipal planning instruments.

- Environmental compliance and monitoring should assess impacts on local food systems, not only biophysical indicators.

- Stronger coordination is required between environmental, water, health, and food governance structures, particularly at municipal level.

- The SAHRC should recognize environmental mismanagement as a contributing factor to violations of the right to food and strengthen accountability accordingly.

F) Theme 5: The role of indigenous knowledge systems, traditional seed practices, and agroecology in achieving food security and resilience

Introduction: agroecology and Indigenous knowledge

Agroecology is a participatory and holistic approach to food systems, integrating transdisciplinary science, practice and a social movement.[65] Agroecology applies ecological and social principles in order to transform the food and agriculture system to be sustainable and equitable. Agroecology is context-specific; principles manifest in diverse practices and foodways based on local knowledge, cultures and conditions. As small-scale farmers around the world know, agroecological food systems enable food sovereignty, which is people's right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and to define their own food and agricultural systems.[66]

While agroecological principles and practices are based on traditional and Indigenous knowledge developed over thousands of years by farmers through interaction with their local environments, the science and movement are more recent developments.[67] These emerged in response to the negative impacts of the green revolution and industrialised agriculture, which promised food security through the use of synthetic chemical inputs, "improved" seeds, and large-scale monoculture production of a few basic commodity crops, while neglecting most traditional or Indigenous species. This system, rather than delivering nutritious food for all, led to farmer indebtedness, environmental degradation, the emergence of resistant superweeds and pests, loss of dietary diversity and biodiversity, displacement of smallholders and other negative impacts.[68]

In South Africa, large-scale, export-oriented commercial farming was a product of colonialism and later apartheid, and was made possible through large-scale dispossession (see theme 3).[69] Commercial monoculture farming was presented as scientifically and economically superior, supported by the government and reserved for the white minority on their large holdings of prime agricultural land. Black farmers, restricted to smaller plots in the homelands, practiced traditional or Indigenous ways of farming that white agricultural researchers considered backwards (and sought to modernize via 'Betterment' planning).[70] In reality, traditional and Indigenous farming knowledge and practices (such as the use of

[65] Wezel, A., Bellon, S., Doré, T. *et al.* (2009). Agroecology as a science, a movement and a practice. A review. *Agronomy for Sustainable Development* 29, 503–515. https://doi.org/10.1051/agro/2009004.
[66] Nyéléni Declaration (2007). https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf
[67] Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology. (2015). Nyéléni. https://www.scholacampesina.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Ny%C3%A9l%C3%A9ni-Declaration-EN.pdf
[68] Patel, R. (2013). The long green revolution. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40(1), 1-63; De Schutter, O. and Vanloqueren, Gaëtan. (2011). The New Green Revolution: How twenty-first-century science can feed the world. *Solutions* 2(4), 33-44.
[69] Kesselman, B. (2024). Transforming South Africa's unjust food system: an argument for decolonization. *Food, Culture & Society*, *27*(3), 792–809. https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2023.2175483
[70] De Wet, C. (1987). Betterment planning in South Africa: Some thoughts on its history, feasibility and wider policy implications. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 6(1-2), 85–122. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589008708729469

Indigenous crops, intercropping, knowledge of seasonal cycles and supplementing with wild foods), predominantly the domain of women, fed large populations for centuries using sustainable methods that would now be referred to as agroecological.[71] In the face of the growing crisis of climate change and the shocks and disruptions it brings (see Theme 8), the traditional wisdom that underpins agroecology will contribute to farmer and food system adaptation and resilience.[72]

With concerted advocacy from social movements, agroecology has gained traction in global policy and programmes. However, as agroecology becomes more popular, and is adopted by governments and inter-governmental organisations, there is the risk that it is misinterpreted as merely a set ecological farming technologies, or even co-opted to limit its transformative potential.[73] Farmers' social movements have stressed that agroecology is more than a farming practice; it represents a way of life, grounded in respect for and balance with nature.[74]

Because agroecology works with and mimics natural systems, agroecological farms are diverse in terms of cultivated plants, wild plants, insects, animals (domesticated as well as wild), and in the soil, microbes. This stands in stark contrast to industrial monoculture production of a single crop or animal breed. Agroecology's biodiversity contributes to a thriving ecosystem, especially when indigenous, locally-adapted crops and breeds are prioritised, which require fewer external inputs.

Agroecology extends beyond production to encompass the entire food system (including distribution, processing and consumption), based on the application of social and ecological principles.[75] The best known agroecological principles are those adopted by the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). The HLPE reviewed academic and social movement articulation of principles to distil 13 principles of agroecology that contribute to 3 'operational principles' of food system sustainability: using resources efficiently, strengthening resilience, and securing social equity.[76] The HLPE also proposed that ecological footprint should be added as a fourth operational principle of sustainable food systems as this considers both the positive and negative environmental impacts of a particular food system, which is a more holistic measure than resource

[71] Kesselman, B. and Zukulu, S. (2025). Traditional foodways of the Amadiba: A struggle for indigenous food sovereignty in Mpondoland, South Africa. *Journal of Political Ecology* 32(1), 5933. doi: https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5933

[72] Odero, K. *et al*. (2025). *African Indigenous Foodways.* African Food Systems Transformation Brief 8. Cape Town: African Food Systems Transformation Collective. https://africanclimatefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/801023_H-African-indigenous-foodways-02.pdf

[73] Giraldo, O. and Rosset, P. (2023). Emancipatory agroecologies: social and political principles. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 50(3): 820-850. DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2022.2120808.

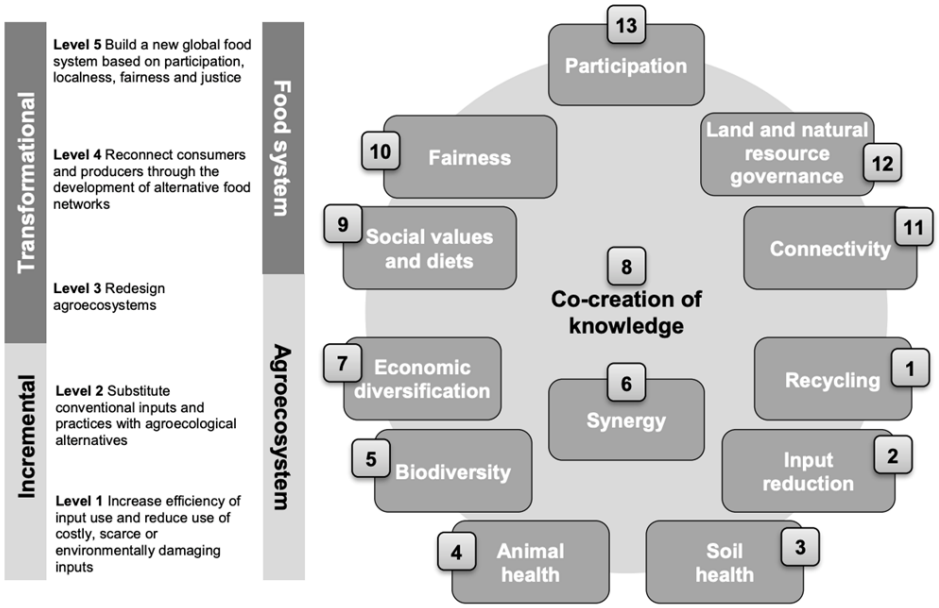
[74] Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology. (2015). Nyéléni. https://www.scholacampesina.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Ny%C3%A9l%C3%A9ni-Declaration-EN.pdf

[75] Francis, C *et al*. (2003). Agroecology: The ecology of food systems. *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture* 22(3), 99-118.

[76] HLPE (2019) *Agroecological approaches and other innovations for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition*. Rome. https://www.fao.org/3/ca5602en/ca5602en.pdf

efficiency. The HLPE aligned the 13 principles with Gliessman's[77] analysis of food system transition, providing a framework for transitioning to an ecologically, socially and economically sustainable food system starting with improving the way one produces food on the farm and then scaling up through changes at the agroecosystem level and eventually to the systemic transformation of the entire food system. The HLPE identified 2 principles (Co-creation of Knowledge, Synergy) that apply across both production and the wider food system. The HLPE compared different innovative approaches in relation to the characteristics contributing to more sustainable food systems and found agroecology to be the most transformative.

Figure 3 Five levels of transition towards SFSs and related principles of Agroecology



Source: transitions on the left hand side adapted from Gliessman (2007), with rounded boxes to the right representing the consolidated set of agroecological principles from Table 1.

Agroecology, food security and the right to food

Agroecology contributes to all six pillars of food security–availability, access, utilization, and stability, sustainability, agency– and to food sovereignty.[78]

1. Availability: sufficient quantities of food to meet our dietary needs must be available through food production, food imports or even food aid. Evidence shows that agroecology contributes to increased productivity and yields in many cases, and by planting a diversity of

[77] Gliessman, S. 2007. *Agroecology: the ecology of sustainable food systems* (2nd edition). Boca Raton, USA: CRC Press.

[78] De Schutter, O. (2010) *Report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier de Schutter.* UN Human Rights Council A/HRC/16/49.

crops, contributes to more diverse and nutritious diets.[79] Many studies have linked agroecology to increased food availability.[80] In contrast, the narrative that synthetic chemicals are needed to produce enough food to "feed the world" has been shown to be false.[81]

2. ***Access***: a person can get enough appropriate food for a nutritious diet by having the physical and economic means to do so. Agroecology contributes to accessibility in various ways. First, it contributes to the incomes of smallholders by increasing the overall yield and diversity of crops produced, augmenting not only household food access but also surpluses available for markets. In addition, by working with natural systems to enhance soil fertility and control pests and diseases, it reduces the reliance of smallholders on expensive external inputs, reducing farmer indebtedness and increasing incomes.[82] Second, agroecology contributes to the availability of wild foods by protecting natural landscapes on and around farms, increasing biodiversity and eliminating chemicals that harm wild plants and animals.[83] Third, agroecological practices that build soil health over time contribute to the ability of smallholders to continue farming using on-farm resources, whereas commercial production rapidly depletes soil nutrients, requiring dependence on ever-increasing levels of chemical inputs to maintain production.[84]

3. ***Utilization***: food should be of adequate quality and nutritional value and a person must know how to prepare and be able to utilise the food effectively to benefit from it. Agroecology tends to favor locally-adapted, indigenous crops and breeds that are often higher in nutrients than commercial, non-native varieties.[85] In addition, it favours traditional, culturally-appropriate foods and food knowledge that have sustained people for generations.[86] Further, practices such as agroforestry and the generation of renewable, farm-based fuels (e.g. biogas or other forms of biomass) as part of energy and nutrient cycling in agroecology may contribute to improved energy availability for cooking and other uses.[87]

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[79] Adoyo, B., Geck, M., *et al*. (2025). Agroecology for sustainable development: evidence on multidimensional performance from a cross-country TAPE assessment in Africa. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 9:1667882. doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2025.1667882

[80] Faure, G. *et al.* (2024). *What agroecology brings to food security and ecosystem services: a review of scientific evidence*. Knowledge Brief 4. DeSIRA-LIFT. https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/library/what-agroecology-brings-food-security-and-ecosystem-services-review-scientific-evidence_en

[81] Elver, H. (2017). Report of the special rapporteur on the right to food. UN Human Rights Council A/HRC/34/48. http://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?Open&DS=A/HRC/34/48&Lang=E

[82] Berger, I. *et al*. (2025). India's agroecology programme, 'Zero Budget Natural Farming', delivers biodiversity and economic benefits without lowering yields. *Nature Ecology & Evolution.* https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-025-02849-7

[83] Zhu, S. *et al*. (2024). Greater attention to wild foods and cultural knowledge supports increased nutrition outcomes associated with agroecology. *Sustainability* 16(10), 3890 https://doi.org/10.3390/su16103890

[84] Bhat, R. *et al* (2023) The role of agroecological principles in enhancing soil health and farm resilience. *Plant Science Review.* DOI: https://doi.org/10.51470/PSR.2023.04.02.07

[85] Van Jaarsveld, P et al. (2014). Nutrient content of eight African leafy vegetables and their potential contribution to dietary reference intakes. *Journal of Food Composition and Analysis* 33, 77-84.

[86] See, for example, *Roots of Resilience: Amadiba Food for Health and Wellbeing*. https://bio-economy.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Roots-of-Resilience-recipe-booklet-Final.pdf

[87] World Rainforest Movement. (2025). Reclaiming energy and food sovereignty through agroecology. *WRM Bulletin* 275. https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/reclaiming-energy-and-food-sovereignty-through-agroecology

4. ***Stability***: to be food secure, a population, household or individual must continue to access food even when there are sudden disruptions like economic shocks, conflicts, weather impacts or seasonal changes in the availability of food. Agroecology contributes to the stability of food supplies through crop diversification, working with nature and seasonal cycles to produce diverse crops that can be harvested at different times, thereby reducing the 'hungry season'.[88] Agroecology also supports farmers to withstand and recover from shocks– there is significant research on the contribution of agroecology to climate resilience (see below).[89] The localisation of agroecological food systems further protects communities from the impacts of more distant shocks. For example, the supply chain disruptions of COVID-19 impacted global supplies of food and agricultural inputs, but communities that produced their own were less affected.[90]

5. **Agency**: capacity of individuals and groups to make their own choices about what food to produce, what foods they eat, how that food is produced, processed and distributed within food systems, and their ability to meaningfully engage in processes that shape food system policies and governance. Agroecology makes important contributions to farmers' agency by utilising their traditional knowledge and reducing dependence on external inputs. This is especially true in the case of farmer-managed seed systems, where farmers' knowledge enables them to save and share seeds for traditional, diverse, locally-adapted and nutritious foods, without having to purchase them.[91] The localisation of food systems, a key component of agroecology, also enhances the agency of consumers by connecting them to producers and enabling them to influence the kinds of foods they can access.[92]

6. **Sustainability**: the food system should ensure food security and nutrition for all without compromising the economic, social and environmental systems required to generate food security and nutrition for future generations. The contribution of agroecology to the long-term sustainability of the food system is well-documented. Many studies have documented agroecology's contribution to soil health as well as its other environmental benefits, such as reduced pollution of land and water and increased biodiversity, all of which contribute to long-term sustainability.[93] Less studied, but equally important, is the social impact of agroecology, which emerges from its focus on farmer agency, knowledge-sharing and localisation. Agroecology is based on co-operation – from fostering helpful relationships between diverse species in agro-ecosystems, to building relationships of solidarity and reciprocity between producer collectives, producers and consumers, and between

[88] Bezner Kerr, R. *et al*. (2021).Can agroecology improve food security and nutrition? A review. *Global Food Security* 29, 100540.
[89] Kozanayi, W and van Niekerk, J. (2024). In the wake of Cyclone Idai: a holistic look at its impacts and an exploration of the resilience-enhancing potential of landscape agroecology. In Wynberg, R (Ed) *African Perspectives on Agroecology.* https://practicalactionpublishing.com/book/2698/african-perspectives-on-agroecology
[90] Biowatch (2023). *Stories of Resilience Built Through Agroecology. https://biowatch.org.za/download/stories-of-resilience/*
[91] Biowatch (2021). *Farmer-led Seed Systems.* https://biowatch.org.za/download/farmer-led-seed-systems/
[92] Agroecology Coalition (2025). Agroecology and Consumers: Strengthening the Role of Citizens in Sustainable Food Systems. https://agroecology-coalition.org/agroecology-and-consumers/
[93] Madsen, S. *et al* (2025). Agroecology supports sustainable development in Africa. A review. *Agronomy for Sustainable Development* 45, 34. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-024-00976-2

movements resisting the corporate control of food. This aspect of agroecology draws on Indigenous cooperative work practices such as ilima/letsema. The improved farmer well-being and social cohesion that agroecology generates contributes to the long-term social sustainability of the food system.[94]

Agroecology and other rights

It is important to note that just as the global, industrialised food system contributes to the violation of numerous rights, not only the right to food, agroecology may contribute to the realisation of numerous rights as well. The 13 principles of agroecology, discussed above, include fairness and participation, which are fundamental to the realisation of all rights.

In addition, while the use of toxic agro-chemicals in conventional agriculture harms the health of farmworkers, rural communities and consumers, the ecologically-sustainable practices of agroecology contribute to farmers' and their communities' enjoyment of the right to health and to a clean environment.[95]

Agroecology also supports the right to water. Whereas chemical-heavy commercial agriculture is responsible for a very high rate of water use in South Africa, agroecology reduces water use through its water conservation, recycling and harvesting practices, as well as the use of drought-tolerant crops and improved soil structure (enabling it to better retain limited water).[96]

Agroecology is intrinsically linked to indigenous foods and Farmers' Rights. Farmers' Rights are specific rights farmers have to use plants and their reproductive materials, to benefit from these plant genetic resources and to participate in making decisions about these.[97] This includes the right to save, use, exchange and sell seed or propagating materials. Having one's own seed is fundamental to making choices about what one grows and eats, including cultural foods that may not be available in commercial markets. These indigenous crops are mostly cultivated by small-scale farmers, where they provide a range of benefits from soil improvement and pest control in intercropped systems, feed for animals, medicinal benefits, and fibre in addition to their uses in food and drinks. Globally small-scale farmers have developed the diversity of crops (and breeds) that form the basis of our food and agricultural systems; Farmers' Rights ensure they are recognised for this contribution and can continue to do so. The diversity of farmer seeds, both in types of crops and varieties of these, is the basis for resilience to changing conditions (climate, pest outbreaks, etc.), thereby enabling

[94] Thapa, A. *et al* (2026) Social-ecological outcomes of agroecological transitions: A case study from natural farming systems in central India. *PLOS Sustainability and Transformation*. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pstr.0000212.

[95] FAO, European Union, CIRAD and DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS). 2022. Food Systems Profile– South Africa. Catalysing the sustainable and inclusive transformation of food systems. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0071en. Nene, N. (2025) Women on Farms Project calls for regulation of farm pesticides. EWN. https://www.ewn.co.za/2025/03/22/women-on-farms-project-calls-for-regulation-of-farm-pesticides

[96] Navdanya International. 2025. World Water Day: Rethinking water management through agroecology. https://navdanyainternational.org/world-water-day-rethinking-water-management-through-agroecology

[97] See International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (especially Article 9), to which South Africa acceded in December 2024.

food security. Agroecological methods also support farmers to produce quality seed. Strong recognition of customary law in South Africa's Constitution, as well as policies in support of Indigenous Knowledge, validate customary seed saving practices.

Agroecology, Indigenous knowledge and climate resilience

Significant research has found that agroecology contributes to farmer and community resilience in the face of climate change and other shocks.[98] As already alluded to above, agroecology contributes to resilience through multiple channels.[99] Crop diversity reduces vulnerability to pests and diseases, extends the growing season and decreases the likelihood of total crop loss in the event of a shock. In addition, increased soil health and moisture control through agroecological practices protect crops from climate shocks such as drought or flooding. In addition to its role in climate change resilience and adaptation, it is worth noting that agroecology contributes to climate change mitigation by decreasing the use of fossil-fuel based inputs, reducing energy usage, and increasing carbon sequestration in soil and biomass.[100]

Indigenous knowledge is increasingly recognised for its value in climate resilience. Indigenous people are custodians of unique and rich traditional knowledge on local resources and cultural rituals. The information is passed on through oral tradition, hands-on training and cultural ceremonies to the next generation. Traditional ways of producing, preserving and sharing food have long been grounded in sustainability; it is an ancient practice to respect the land and live in harmony with natural cycles. Researchers are beginning to study the ways in which Indigenous knowledge can contribute to climate early warning and adaptation, while the contribution of traditional and Indigenous knowledge to mitigation is well documented.[101]

Agroecology, South Africa's domestic policy objectives and international obligations

The transformation of agri-food systems offers many opportunities for meeting South Africa's domestic policy objectives and international obligations under the Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture and the Paris Climate Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

As a holistic approach, agroecology has the potential to contribute to realisation of the rights to food, water, health and a clean environment. In addition, it can contribute to climate

[98] Dagunga, G. *et al* (2023). Agroecology and resilience of smallholder food security: a systematic review. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 7, https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2023.1267630.
[99] Altieri, M. et al (2015). Agroecology and the design of climate change-resilient farming systems. *Agronomy for Sustainable Development* 35, 869–890 https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-015-0285-2. Bezner Kerr, R *et al* (2023) Agroecology as a transformative approach to tackle climatic, food, and ecosystemic crises. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 62, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2023.101275
[100] Leippert, F *et al*. (2020). The potential of agroecology to build climate-resilient livelihoods and food systems. FAO and Biovision.
[101] Motsumi, M and Nemakonde, L. (2025). Indigenous early warning indicators for improving natural hazard predictions. *Jamba,* 17**,** 1754. Nyahunda, L. (2024). Integration of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) into climate change mitigation and adaptation endeavours: milestones and gaps in South Africa and Zimbabwe's climate policy frameworks. *Climatic Change,* 177.

change mitigation, adaptation and resilience; biodiversity protection; as well as decent, equitable and sustainable livelihoods.[102] Not only does agroecology contribute to food and nutrition security, but it directly contributes to 10 out of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[103]. While the shift to more ecological farming systems is sometimes portrayed as a threat to food security and rural livelihoods by those invested in maintaining the status quo, in reality the opposite is true. Support for agroecology represents a good investment for government, as it can achieve multiple policy objectives simultaneously, at relatively low cost.

Support for agroecology and Indigenous food and farming knowledge would also be a critical component of domestication and implementation of international frameworks such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Both of these frameworks recognise farmers' rights, traditional foods and knowledge, as well as agroecological practices and systems.

Agroecology policy: support, obstacles and gaps

An evaluation of South Africa's policy landscape found that many of our current policies have aspects that are supportive of an agroecological approach or address some of the agroecological principles[104]. However, there are many areas of overlap and there is no coordinating strategy to integrate and leverage policies and inter-departmental cooperation for food system transition. In addition, dominant agricultural policy largely facilitates and regulates the large-scale commercial farming and agribusiness model with limited support for polycultural, ecological approaches. The key 2022 Agriculture and Agroprocessing Master Plan (AAMP) is an example of this commercial orientation which seeks to upscale small farmers through aggregation of land and production to supply value chains of a select list of commodity crops for the domestic and export market. This tendency is echoed in the extension support provided to farmers, and the industrial inputs supplied in government subsidy programmes. There is little acknowledgement of small-scale farmers' contribution to local food security. Nor are there meaningful efforts to build localised food systems and markets through supplying open pollinated variety (OPV) seed suited to local food cultures, or appropriate infrastructure and equipment for agroecological production and micro-processing.

A National Plan for the Conservation and Use of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture from 2018 – 2027[105] provides opportunities to strengthen farmer-led seed systems and the use and promotion of indigenous and traditional crops. However the budget

[102] El Bilali, H., Strassner, C., & Ben Hassen, T. (2021). Sustainable Agri-Food Systems: Environment, Economy, Society, and Policy. *Sustainability*, *13*(11), 6260. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116260

[103] FAO. (2018). FAO's work on agroecology. A pathway to achieving the SDGs. Rome. 27 pp. http://www.fao.org/3/i9021en/I9021EN.pdf

[104] African Centre for Biodiversity. (2023). An assessment of support for agroecology in South Africa's policy landscape. https://acbio.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Assessment-for-agroecology-in-South-Africa.pdf

[105] Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development. 2017. National Plan for Conservation and Sustainable Use of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Pretoria: DALRRD.

is woefully inadequate to this task; it merely enables support for a handful of community seed banks and collection of accessions with some repatriation of seed to communities following disasters.

A new National Agroecology Framework for South Africa (NAFSA) has been developed. This must be finalised and implemented–at present there are plans for very limited implementation by the Agricultural Research Council (ARC). While important, this is insufficient. For the NAFSA to have the desired impact, it must be streamlined across all Department of Agriculture policies and programmes as well as coordinating with other key departments.

Theme 5: Recommendations

A) Support for farmers: This section draws from engagement with farmers and farmer organisations across the country over many years. In addition, it draws on farmer demands developed in a series of engagements held by Biowatch in KwaZulu-Natal between 2023 and 2025 and at a Seed and Farmers' Rights meeting organised by Biowatch and the University of Cape Town in Pretoria in September 2025.

- Recognise the important role of small-scale agroecological farmers as knowledge holders; custodians of land, water, seed, biodiversity and other aspects of natural heritage; and food providers for the country.
- Support secure and equitable access to land for small-scale farmers, with all of the necessary infrastructure (water, fencing, access roads, etc.), through land reform/redistribution, customary allocation as well as access to grants and credit. Land should be prioritised in urban and peri-urban areas for small-scale agroecological production, to support local urban food systems with healthy and sustainable food. Target such support to women and youth to address current imbalances in land access.
- Ensure timely and appropriate support to small-scale farmers through agroecological extension, provision of agroecological inputs, and support for household and community seed banks. Stop providing synthetic chemical inputs and GM seeds as input support. Train extension officers in soil health, biological pest management, nutrient cycling and diversified farming systems. Shift advisory services away from input-supply recommendations toward on-farm ecological management and problem-solving support. Facilitate farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing rather than top-down knowledge transmission.
- Support and incentivise transitions to agroecology. Farmers require training, access to agroecological inputs, ongoing advice, financial support/risk reduction and especially farmer-to-farmer support as they transition from chemical-heavy monoculture production to agroecology.
- Support localised food systems through provision of infrastructure for local markets (structures, ablution facilities, storage facilities) without expensive permit access.
- Shift government procurement towards locally- and agroecologically-produced food, including traditional and indigenous crops, for the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), hospitals and other food-procuring departments and programmes.
- Integrate agroecology into education and training, from basic to tertiary levels, to raise the next generation of seed custodians, agroecology practitioners and trainers.

Agricultural colleges as well as agriculture programmes in universities need to offer agroecology education. Support AgriSETA accreditation of agroecology training courses offered by civil society organisations and farmers. These will be particularly important in the context of the President's call for 10,000 new extension officers (SONA 2026).

- Implement mandatory buffer zones around farms using agro-chemicals (pesticides, herbicides, etc.) and genetically-modified seeds, to protect agroecological farmers from contamination of their crops and seeds, and to protect the health of food, farmers, farmworkers and communities.
- Support multiplication and distribution of traditional, Indigenous OPV seed varieties to protect and promote these species, which are well-adapted to the local environment, climate resilient and highly nutritious.

B) Policy changes are needed at various levels. This includes removing barriers to agroecology support and implementation, ensuring alignment with agroecology priorities across agricultural and other laws and policies, implementing existing favourable policies and developing new ones where needed.

- All policy and governance processes must involve meaningful public participation processes that include the farmers and other affected stakeholders, at all stages from development to implementation. This should happen in farmers' communities, not only in Pretoria.
- Finalise and implement the National Agroecology Framework for South Africa (NAFSA), ensuring that implementation includes public participation and is mainstreamed across the entire Department of Agriculture, as well as other departments (e.g., Health, Education, Trade and Industry) as appropriate. Revise existing agriculture laws and policies as needed to align with the NAFSA.
- Prioritise finalisation and implementation of the National Food and Nutrition Security Plan (NFNSP), with meaningful public participation, and ensure that it includes appropriate support to agroecology production and markets.
- Incorporate agroecology into South Africa's climate change frameworks, including the National Adaptation Strategy and Plan, the agriculture sector's climate change adaptation and mitigation plan (CCAMP) and local level adaptation and mitigation plans.
- Revise the Plant Breeders Rights and Plant Improvement Acts, and accompanying regulations, which restrict Farmers' Rights. Smallholders should be free to save, exchange and sell any seed that enters their seed systems, in line with the ITPGRFA. The current exemptions for smallholder farmers are limited and difficult to understand and implement and contravention criminalises farmers.
- Incorporate agroecology into South Africa's commitments and international reporting as part of domesticating international commitments, including: National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) under the CBD; Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) to greenhouse gas emissions reduction and climate change adaptation under the Paris Agreement. Domesticate and implement the UNDROP and ITPGRFA.
- Implement municipal composting initiatives to reduce the flow of organic waste to landfills (saving space and reducing greenhouse gas emissions) and deliver compost to communities to increase soil organic matter, improve water retention, and reduce erosion.

G) Theme 6: Institutional coordination, policy coherence, and legislative adequacy

This section focuses on the inadequacies of current institutional, policy and legislative measures aimed at addressing food and nutrition insecurity. Despite a range of interventions by the South African state since 1994, there is a lack of strategic coherence that feeds into poor coordination of food and nutrition interventions, all reflected in continued, if not growing food insecurity and the worst outcomes of it, such as the rates of stunting among children.

Below, we set out some key points on the historical and current context that characterise the problem and inform what needs to be done, the challenges being experienced, and the current state of legislative, policy and programme responses. This is a short overview focussed on the important policies and programmes and the gaps. It would make this too lengthy a submission if we were to elaborate the details of every policy and programme. We conclude with some key recommendations.

Context and key challenges

The South African food system today is still shaped in fundamental ways by centuries of deliberate colonial and then apartheid destruction of African agriculture and food systems. The dispossession of millions of Black Africans from their land was a central part of this destruction. Other measures included the imposition of a range of taxes and restrictions on African farming and food related business activities. Alongside the destruction of black agriculture and food systems, there was a heavy investment in the building of a particular form of white owned and controlled and capital intensive agriculture. That form of agriculture was embedded in a food system that was equally concentrated in terms of ownership and control and was primarily orientated to serving the needs of the elite white minority and the metropoles of the colonial masters. The investment in that food system included: research, technological development, land transfers to white land owners, roads, dams, irrigation infrastructure, markets, institutions and enabling policy and regulations. There was a fit and a level of lock-in across the food system with each part fitting with the other in terms of the scale and nature of organisation.

This food system, created under colonialism and apartheid, has not been unravelled post-apartheid, thus leaving in place a food system that sits on fundamentally unjust foundations. In many ways the apartheid food system has been further entrenched with post-apartheid economic liberalisation and integration into the global food system. During the transition to democracy and in the first years of that democracy, much of the state machinery, such as marketing boards, were dismantled with some responsibilities being passed to industry bodies. The government essentially washed its hands of responsibility for regulation, leaving industry to regulate itself and in the process the state capacity to regulate was severely limited[106]. This has seen an increased concentration of ownership across the food system, from the ownership of the most productive land and farms to the ownership of food companies and supermarket groups, post-apartheid (see theme 2). With no substantive land reform and the dismantling of state involvement in agriculture and the food system, those who had benefitted from colonialism and apartheid remained in the driving seat.

The continued domination of white ownership and control is an issue, but more important is that the nature and organisation of the food system in South Africa was reenforced. Remarkably, the Agriculture and Agro-Processing Master Plan (AAMP)[107] only aims to increase the share of black farmers in overall production to 20% by 2030 and still adds provisos, such as noting that “in some industries, the share will be lower due to structural

[106] Ledger, T (2016). An empty plate. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
[107] Agriculture and Agro-Processing Master Plan “Social Compact” (2022): https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/saf214490.pdf

constraints, capital requirements and the long-term cyclical nature of the product". There has been some limited change in the race of those owning parts of the food system, but this has not been accompanied by any real change in the overall structure with its inequalities and favouring of elites. The levels of concentration have increased with a new important shift to greater financialization that is seeing more investor and international influence.

To some extent what has happened in the South African food system has followed international (or more precisely USA) trends towards concentration of ownership, capital intensive production, mono-cropping and mono-stocking, financialization, and supermarketization. This USA driven model has also been influential in other parts of the world. In South Africa this model is particularly extreme, with some of the highest levels of concentration of ownership, reflected in things like the large average farm sizes, dairy herd sizes, etc.. This model of agriculture and food system is particularly inappropriate and devastating in the context of a society with the highest levels of inequality in the world[108] and very high levels of unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity.

Sketching this context is to bring home two main points. One, the nature of the food system in South Africa is not something that has organically emerged because it was the most appropriate and efficient in this context; it was not economically or naturally inevitable. Rather, it was systematically created to meet particular racist and elite interests. Two, this reality places a particular responsibility on the state today to put in place legislation and policies that explicitly challenge the injustices of this system in order to build a more just, equitable, and sustainable food system geared to serving the majority, and in particular those in poverty. To some extent this imperative was captured in the Constitution of South Africa, most directly in Sections 27, 28, and the parts of Section 25 that mandate land reforms to address past injustices. Other fundamental rights in the Constitution, such as the right to life (Section 11) and the right to dignity (Section 10), which are non-derogable rights, can clearly never be achieved without a more just food system that ends the scourge of food insecurity and hunger. But none of these rights in the Constitution have been given full effect, thus making the current food system a violation of the Constitution and the state failures to address the injustices of it a violation of the Constitutional obligation to give effect to these rights.

Right to food failures

No doubt the indicators will be repeated again and again throughout the SAHRC investigation, so will not be elaborated in detail here. In brief, the current South African food system is inflicting on the nation and its people the triple burden of malnutrition, with far too many people: 1) not getting adequate nutrition; 2) suffering with obesity; and 3) negatively affected by micro-nutrient deficiencies[109]. There are many indicators of these failures to ensure the right to food. Notably, the continued high, even increasing levels of child stunting with more than 1 in 4 five year olds suffering this fate, and the even more devastating indicator that 43% of two year olds are stunted.[110] Stunting limits the physical, intellectual and emotional development meaning that these children will never reach the full development they could have and will not be able to contribute in the society to the extent

[108] World Bank (2022). Inequality in Southern Africa: An Assessment of the Southern African Customs Union. Washington, DC: World Bank. World Inequality Database: https://wid.world. Chatterjee A. Czajka L. Gethin A (2020). WIDER Working Paper 2020/45. Estimating the distribution of household wealth in South Africa

[109] FAO, European Union, CIRAD and DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS). 2022. Food Systems Profile – South Africa. Catalysing the sustainable and inclusive transformation of food systems. Rome, Brussels, Montpellier, France and Bellville, South Africa. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0071en

[110] South Africa Demographic and Health Survey (2016) https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR337/FR337.pdf

they could have; a tragedy for those affected and for the country. Shockingly, 973 children died of severe acute malnutrition in South Africa's hospitals last year (2025)[111]. These were the ones who got to hospital. The actual number dying from malnutrition may be far higher. That means a minimum of around three children are dying from hunger every day in South Africa. At the same time, obesity rates are 67.9% among adult women and 38.2% among men with very negative health outcomes in the form of a range of non-communicable diseases. The majority of individuals suffering from obesity are living in low-income households, highlighting the reliance on cheap, unhealthy foods. More than half the population simply cannot afford a healthy diet leaving 63.5% of households with some level of food insecurity[112].

Without going into other concerns, such as around ecological sustainability, job shedding and workers exploitation, the food system in South Africa is failing at the most basic level of ensuring the right to food for all; it is not delivering food and nutrition security. This calls for urgent, coherent and sustained intervention by all, with a particular responsibility on the state as the duty bearer constitutionally obliged to not violate rights, to protect rights, and to give effect to rights that are in the South African Constitution and also universally recognised.

Urban food insecurity

We make a particular note on urban food insecurity as this is a rising challenge that has often not been given sufficient attention. With the responsibility for national food and nutrition security policy sitting with the National Department of Agriculture (NDA), who focus on agricultural development in rural areas, there is a risk that the urban continues to be marginalized in these debates. Two thirds of people in South Africa who have inadequate access to food now live in urban areas (https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16235).[113] This will become a bigger challenge as South Africa's urban population is set to increase from around 68% of the country's population to 71.3% in 2030 and almost 80% by 2050,[114] which will further increase the proportion of the country's food insecure living in urban areas.

Despite the realities of food insecurity as an increasingly urban challenge, the national government response to food insecurity systematically frames the challenge as a rural challenge to be addressed by production support. The vast majority of urban residents access (or fail to access) food via market sources formal and informal. In order to ensure the right to food for urban residents, it is essential that the State develop strategies to address the urban realities of food insecurity.[115] This requires far more attention to the functioning of markets and the nature of 'value chains', including food processing and retailing.

[111] Why so many South African children are dying of hunger: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-01-11-watch-why-so-many-south-african-children-are-dying-of-hunger/

[112] Simelane, T. Mutanga, S.S. Hongoro, C. Parker, W. Mjimba V. Zuma, K.Kajombo, R. Ngidi, M. Masamha, B. Mokhele, T. Managa, R. Ngungu, M. Sinyolo, S. Tshililo, F. Ubisi, N. Skhosana, Ndinda, C. Sithole, M. Muthige, M. Lunga, W. Tshitangano, F. Dukhi, N., F. Sewpaul, R. Mkhongi, A. Marinda, E. (2023). National Food and Nutrition Security Survey: National Report: HSRC: Pretoria.

[113] Focus on food inadequacy and hunger in South Africa in 2021: https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16235

[114] UN-Habitat, (2014). The state of African Cities 2014: re-imagining sustainable urban transitions. *United Nations Human Settlements Programme, Nairobi.*

[115] HLPE. 2024. Strengthening urban and peri-urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition, in the context of urbanization and rural transformation. Rome, CFS HLPE-FSN.

Local government has a significant impact on the nature of the urban food system and on urban planning aspects that shape food security outcomes.[116] However, National government has failed to acknowledge the currently unfunded mandates of local government to address the right to food. It has so far failed to effectively include local government a clear mandate in relation to food and nutrition security policy and programming. The right to food takes on particular characteristics in urban areas with failures of the state to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food.[117]

Adequacy and coherence of state actions

As the Constitution of South Africa says, "the State must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of each of these rights."[118]

One of the first steps to giving effect to rights in the Constitution is for the government to pass legislation to create the legal mechanisms and clarity, in terms of rights and obligations, that would facilitate implementation and accountability. While one can, in South Africa, take up litigation to assert constitutional rights, without enabling legislation in place it is much harder to do so. The failure to pass enabling legislation specifically to give effect to Section 27 and 28 of the Constitution, 30 years after the Constitution was adopted, is a glaring failure. It appears that successive post-apartheid governments, both at executive and legislative levels, have decided that they don't want to be held accountable for their failure to give effect to the right to food, so have decided not to put in place the legislation that could make it easier to hold them accountable.

The government has put in place a range of policies and programmes to contribute to improving food and nutrition security.

There is the 2013 National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security. This is, however, limited and outdated and has also not been systematically implemented. It is notable that it has no explicit or clear approach to ensuring food affordability, despite acknowledging that millions go hungry due to not being in an economic position to obtain sufficient food. There is also a lack of clarity on the institutional responsibility for implementing the policy. There is no clarity on the roles of different departments. There are mentions of government, private sector, non-government organisation (NGO) and community-based organisation (CBO) interventions without clarity on the differing roles and responsibilities of each actor. There is a rather vague mention of "Overall leadership" to be "provided by government, advised by a "National Food and Nutrition Advisory Committee", composed of various experts and chaired by the Deputy President. This is not adequate in defining the roles of specific parts of government or in clarifying the structure, powers and role of the advisory structure. In addition to which that advisory structure has never been put in place.

There was a five-year National Food and Nutrition Security Plan (NFNSP) for the period 2018 to 2023, which was meant to operationalise the 2013 Policy. The evaluation of that plan showed that it was largely not implemented and thus not effective. One of the reasons for this was the failure to establish the key structure that was supposed to oversee and coordinate implementation, which is the National Food and Nutrition Security Council. Further, there were no budgets made available specifically for the implementation of the plan.

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[116] De Visser, J. (April 2019), "Multilevel Government, Municipalities and Food Security" Food Security SA Working Paper Series No. 005. DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security, South Africa.

[117] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-10-16-linking-the-right-to-the-city-with-the-right-to-food-offers-important-opportunities-to-enhance-food-security/

[118] Constitution of South Africa, 1996.

Work has been underway for almost two years now to write the new NFNSP that will either be a further 5 year plan or possibly a 10 year plan. We appreciate the efforts made by the National Department of Agriculture (NDA) to draft the new plan and to include a range of stakeholders and experts in this process. The unfortunate reality, however, is that at this point the country has had no plan in place for achieving the constitutionally mandated right to food (food and nutrition security) for more than two years. Further, the almost complete failure to implement the last plan gives little hope that having a plan will lead to action and impact, especially as the overarching structure of the National Food and Nutrition Security Council is still not in place and indications are that there may again be no new or dedicated budgets to ensure implementation.

In practice the most important state interventions to improve food and nutrition security are probably: 1) the extensive grant system that is essential for the survival of the millions of people depending on these grants; 2) the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) that provides food for over 9 million scholars every school day. These both have large budgets and reach millions of people.

There is also important support provided for nutrition in early childhood development centres and early learning programmes (ELPs). These are the responsibility of the Department of Basic Education (DBE).[119] The Department of Social Development (DSD), as well as being responsible for much of the grant system, runs some programmes focussed on nutrition, such as the Household Food and Nutrition Security Programme (HFNSP), which includes Food Distribution Centres (FDCs) and Community Nutrition Development Centres (CNDCs). These involve the purchasing of food and collecting and distributing food donations from a range of actors. The DSD works in collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs), that run many of the distribution centres, and the private sector, including those who donate food.

The grants are absolutely essential in avoiding many millions more people being in extreme poverty and suffering and dying from hunger in South Africa. The grant system must be preserved and enhanced. A key limitation of the grants in ensuring food security is that the amounts of the grant are simply too limited to enable people to buy a healthy diet. The Social Relief of Distress Grant of R370 per month and the Child Support Grant of R560 are far less than the current R796 per month food poverty line[120] and the R948 that Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity (PMBEJD) estimates it costs to buy a nutritious diet for a child.[121] Not only are these grants low relative to the cost of food, their value has been systematically dropping as the government fails to adjust them sufficiently to keep up with food inflation. Surviving on these grants is not dignified and does not achieve the right to food, for too many it is also an inadequate protection of the right to life, as seen in tragic deaths from malnutrition.

One of the biggest gaps in the current food and nutrition interventions is the inadequate approach to ensure sufficient nutrition in the first 1,000 days (see theme 10). The child support grant on its own is inadequate and it comes too late, in that the damage of undernutrition that undermines a child's full development is often caused during pregnancy and in the early months of the child's life before the grant is received. There is a further gap in that children only start getting access to nutrition specific interventions when and if they go to an ECD or ELP. Many children, including many of the most vulnerable to hunger, don't attend ECDs. Further, only registered ECDs, about 33% of all ECDs, are beneficiaries of the subsidy that supports food provision. The HFNSP could theoretically cover some of the gap,

[119] Providing Nutrition Support for ECD, Synthesis Report, 2023 https://www.ecdreform.org.za/uploads/synthesis-report-digital-final.pdf

[120] StatsSA National Poverty Lines (2024), Statistical Release P0310.1: https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P03101/P031012024.pdf

[121] PMBEJD January 2026 Household Affordability Index report: https://pmbejd.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/January-2026-Household-Affordability-Index-PMBEJD_28012026.pdf

but it has a far from comprehensive reach and there is limited coordination between DSD and DBE in terms of what they deliver where and to whom.

The Agriculture and Agro-Processing Master Plan (AAMP) is a potentially important part of the response to food and nutrition insecurity, but it is limited with some problematic biases. The overarching logic is growing agricultural production, including exports, by continuing with the same structure of agriculture and food system in place in South Africa. The plan aims for more black ownership, but with limited ambitions as mentioned above. The focus is on value chains and including more farmers in them and these are in practice corporate value chains. There is little attention to having more markets including local markets. Food security is one of the objectives, but there is no clear plan of how the form of agriculture proposed could really contribute to food security. There is no mention of the constitution and the right to food. There is no definition given for food security (and no mention of nutrition security) leaving a concern that it is really only focused on increased agricultural production with assumption this will contribute to food being available in the country.[122]

This section is not focussed on land reforms (see theme 3), but it is worth noting that the land reform programme has failed to make any substantive impact on the structure of land holding or on the opportunities for people to produce food for themselves. Apart from the failure to deliver land at scale to the landless majority, it has been difficult for new and small-scale farmers to compete in markets and corporate value chains that are dominated by established large-scale producers with entrenched, often ethnically based, relations between buyers, agents, and farmers.[123]

There are effectively no current economic interventions from the state to influence the food sector to make food more affordable. The VAT exemptions on a limited range of foods is the only direct intervention in this regard. There are no other interventions, such as incentives or regulations, food reserves or the use of duties to regulate prices. Even during an official State of Disaster, declared in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, there was no intervention to make food more affordable. As the pandemic took hold and prices and food corporation profits rose while millions lost jobs and incomes, the state still did nothing to moderate food prices.[124] The Competition Commission of South Africa (CCSA) has noted the high levels of concentration in grocery retailing and the way in which supermarkets use their buying power to put pressure on farmers for lower prices but don't necessarily pass this saving onto customers.[125] The CCSA has also found anti-competitive practices, such as the use of long-term exclusive lease agreements with mall owners that are used to prevent competitors operating in the same areas[126] (see theme 2).

In most urban areas, there is little if any land reserved for food production. Most local government Integrated and Spatial Development Plans say nothing or little about food markets and food retailing. The municipal markets that play a central role in fresh produce distribution, enabling tens of thousands of small and micro food traders to operate, are being

[122] Agriculture and Agro-Processing Master Plan "Social Compact" (2022): https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/saf214490.pdf

[123] Malungane, M. and Wegerif, M.C., 2025. The Johannesburg fresh produce market: an analysis of its operations and contribution to the food system. Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems, 9, p.1557007.

[124] Wegerif, M.C., 2024. Street traders' contribution to food security: lessons from fresh produce traders' experiences in South Africa during Covid-19. Food Security, 16(1), pp.115-131.

[125] CCSA (2021). *Essential Food Pricing Monitoring: August 2021*. https://www.compcom.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EFPM-Report_Aug-2021.pdf.

[126] CCSA (2019). *The Grocery Retail Market Inquiry Final Report*. http://www.compcom.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/GRMI-Non-Confidential-Report.pdf.

undermined by neglect and poor management.[127] The number of municipal markets has declined from 102 in the 1960s to 17 in 2020, and just 14 now, with 16 listed, but no data from Nelspruit and Mtata in Jan 2026.[128] These are just some of the signs of the neglect of food system and food security issues.

Local responses

In this situation of neglect of food systems, it is worth noting the responses from the ground that are contributing to food accessibility and creating broadly owned and more equitable parts of the food system. While public land is not made available for agriculture in urban areas, people are doing urban farming, often finding space under overhead power lines and in flood planes to produce. However, they face constant insecurity and many lose out in the end to others settling on the land or face eviction for other land uses.

While no or little provision is made for local markets and small shops and street traders in government urban planning, people are creating the space by occupying side-walks and putting spaza shops in their front yards. Street traders, for example, make an essential contribution to food accessibility by selling foods, including a lot of fresh produce, at low prices and in small and flexible quantities close to where people live, often providing interest free credit.[129] There are no 'food deserts' in low income areas in South Africa due to the efforts of the multitudes of street traders, bakkie traders, trolley traders, and spaza shop operators. These efforts are made despite continuing to face uncertainty and harassment and having to operate with a lack of enabling infrastructure.

Conclusion

There is quite a lot being done to address food and nutrition insecurity, but it is fragmented with important gaps and a lack of coherence. There is no overarching leadership or shared vision that can pull the different parts of government to work together to deal effectively with the complex issue of food and nutrition security.

Major gaps are in: 1) addressing the first 1,000 days; 2), too many people, especially young children and then adults with no sources of income aside from the social relief of distress grant; 3) the lack of an approach, action, and delegation of particular responsibilities for food systems at the local government level; and 4) a lack of interventions to transform the nature of the food system, in particular the economic structure of it, to be more equitable, serve the majority better, and to improve food affordability.

Theme 6: Recommendations

Given the current state of the food system in South Africa and the high levels of hunger and food insecurity, we are making the following recommendations in relation to institutional coherence and policy and legislative adequacy. These are divided into short-term actions that can be implemented immediately and medium-term interventions that should be put in

[127] Johannesburg's produce market has supplied the informal sector for decades: a refresh is due https://theconversation.com/johannesburgs-produce-market-has-supplied-the-informal-sector-for-decades-a-refresh-is-due-268151

[128] South African Union of Food Markets, monthly turn-over data.

[129] Sithole, O. and Wegerif, M.C., 2025. The contribution of cart traders to fresh produce accessibility in Soshanguve township, South Africa. *Discover Food*, *5*(1), p.364. and Wegerif, M.C., 2024. Street traders' contribution to food security: lessons from fresh produce traders' experiences in South Africa during Covid-19. *Food Security*, *16*(1), pp.115-131.

place in the coming few years. Given the urgency of the hunger crisis, there should be no reliance on long-term measures.

The government should immediately:

- Finalise, consult widely on, and adopt the new NFNSP.
- Establish the National Food and Nutrition Security Council with strong inter-governmental and non-state actor participation, including a non-state Deputy Chair or Chairperson. The national Council should be replicated in provinces and districts.
- Support the effective operation of the National Food and Nutrition Security Council with political support, budgets, and powers.
- Increase the value of the child support grant to at least the level of the food poverty line.
- Explicitly include food and nutrition security responsibilities in the mandate of all local governments with requirements for the inclusion of food system and food and nutrition security provisions in Integrated Development Plans and Spatial Development plans.
- Local governments need to be required and supported to take food system actions, including improving investment and management of existing municipal fresh produce markets, making space and infrastructure for more local food markets, securing more trading space and rights to trade in regulations for micro and medium food enterprises (including street traders and spaza shops), and reserving public land for food production in all areas (urban and rural).

The government should in the coming 2 to 5 years:

- Allocate dedicated budgets to the implementation of the NFNSP.
- Develop a comprehensive and well informed food affordability policy framework that uses a range of tools in a coherent way to improve food affordability. The measures to be considered should cover economic interventions such as: the use of taxes and duties; strategic investments; regulating markets, trade and concentration of ownership; providing incentives; food vouchers; subsidies, food reserves; and grants.
- Continue and enhance the food system transformation pathways process, convened by NDA, to seek holistic and well informed approaches to improving the food system.
- Put in place strong leadership in government to drive an integrated approach across spheres of government to achieve the right to food for all.
- Streamline land redistribution and provide increased budgets for far reaching land reforms that make available land in a range of ways in rural and urban areas. This should include public land, such as allotments and commonage that can be made available for agricultural production.
- Leverage the NSNP and other state procurement of food for food system transformation in ways that are coordinated with land reforms, improved agricultural support for a more broadly owned, diverse, localised and dynamic food system.

H) Theme 7: The role of civic participation, public accountability and social movements in advancing the right to food

Introduction: Hunger as a Political Question

The SAHRC Concept Note situates South Africa's food crisis within a profound contradiction: a country capable of producing sufficient food at national level while millions remain food insecure.[130] This contradiction is not primarily technical. It is political. Despite constitutional guarantees under Sections 27(1)(b) and 28(1)(c), child stunting has remained stagnant at approximately one in four children for decades, revealing a persistent gap between constitutional promise and lived reality.[131]

Understanding this gap requires interrogating power within food systems: who controls land, production, distribution, pricing and policy direction. As scholars have argued, the way "food systems" are conceptualised shapes the solutions that are considered legitimate.[132] When food is framed primarily as a commodity within globalised value chains, corporate-led solutions dominate. When food is framed as a human right and a commons, democratic and redistributive approaches become central.

For the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) collective working alongside Inyanda, the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA SA), the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU) and affiliated formations, civic mobilisation is not ancillary to the right to food. It is the mechanism through which constitutional obligations are made enforceable in practice. Mobilisation operates as constitutional praxis: organised communities demanding accountability while simultaneously constructing alternatives.

From Beneficiaries to Rights-Holders: Reclaiming Political Agency

TCOE's programmes have emphasised movement building, food sovereignty and democratisation of governance, consistently emphasising the centrality of self-organisation among landless and small-scale producers.[133] Historically marginalised rural communities have often been treated as passive beneficiaries of development initiatives. South Africa's agrarian structure is rooted in colonial and apartheid dispossession, global trade liberalisation and increasing corporate concentration.[134]

In this context, civic participation must exceed procedural consultation. It must enable communities to act as organised rights-holders.

Inyanda has strengthened local producer formations across provinces, creating spaces for collective deliberation and coordinated action. The RWA has advanced an ecofeminist approach that foregrounds the intersectionality of gender, race and class in struggles for food sovereignty. CSAAWU has mobilised farm workers and farm dwellers to challenge unlawful evictions and labour exploitation, utilising both collective action and constitutional litigation.[135]

These initiatives demonstrate that civic mobilisation encompasses:

- Political education and consciousness-building;

[130] South African Human Rights Commission. (2025). Politics, Power and the Right to Food: Concept Note.
[131] Devereux, S., & Heywood, M. (2024). World Food Day 2024: It's time to 'abnormalise' hunger.
[132] Recine, E., et al. (2021). Conceptual disputes in global food systems discourse.
[133] Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE). (2021). Annual Report.
[134] Weis, T. (2007). The Global Food Economy.
[135] TCOE. (2023). Annual Report.

- Leadership formation and internal democracy;
- Collective action at local and provincial levels;
- Engagement with policy and governance processes;
- Development of agroecological alternatives.

Mobilisation also involves navigating what has been described as both subjective and objective struggles. Subjectively, movements must confront internal hierarchies, gendered power relations and ideological fragmentation. Objectively, they confront structural unemployment, climate shocks, municipal dysfunction and corporate dominance.[136] Sustained mobilisation requires constant reflection, learning and adaptation.

Public Accountability: Activating Constitutional Obligations

The Concept Note affirms that the right to food binds all spheres of government and, through Section 8(2), extends to private actors. However, institutional fragmentation and weak enforcement mechanisms undermine implementation. Civic mobilisation therefore plays a critical role in activating accountability.

a) Local Governance and Municipal Accountability

Municipalities influence food access through land use planning, commonage management, water provision, informal trading regulation and service delivery frameworks.[137] TCOE's democratisation of governance strategy has included:

- Training and capacity-building of councillors and community representatives;
- Engagement with Integrated Development Plan (IDP) processes;
- Public dialogues addressing water crises affecting small-scale producers;
- Formal correspondence challenging the sale of municipal commonage land[138].

Such actions move beyond protest towards structured engagement with governance systems, reinforcing that municipalities are constitutional duty-bearers in realising socio-economic rights.

b) Litigation and Rights Enforcement

Through collaboration with legal support structures, farm worker movements have challenged evictions and land grabs in court[139]. These interventions underscore the justiciability of socio-economic rights and the necessity of organised constituencies capable of activating legal remedies.

c) Policy and Narrative Intervention

Civic mobilisation also operates discursively. Policy submissions on agricultural legislation, public statements and media engagement ensure that grassroots perspectives inform national debates[140]. In doing so, movements contest narratives that reduce food insecurity to supply constraints rather than structural inequality.

[136] TCOE. (2022). Annual Report.
[137] De Visser, J. (2019). Multilevel government, municipalities and food security.
[138] TCOE. (2023). Annual Report.
[139] TCOE. (2023). Annual Report.
[140] TCOE. (2023). Annual Report.

Public accountability, therefore, must be understood as multi-dimensional—administrative, judicial, political and discursive.

Constructing Alternatives: Food Sovereignty in Practice

Mobilisation gains depth and legitimacy when it advances concrete alternatives. Over the past three years, TCOE's food sovereignty stream has expanded agroecological hubs, seed saving initiatives and farmer exchange visits across provinces[141]. By 2023, 24 agroecological hubs were operational, supporting climate-resilient production and strengthening localised food systems through activities like promoting localised seedbanks and exchange of seeds in an effort to break seed monopolies[142].

The development of local markets, including the Mowbray Market initiative, illustrates urban–rural solidarity and demonstrates the feasibility of alternative distribution networks. These interventions align with broader systemic transformation approaches that challenge market-centred paradigms and prioritise justice, ecological sustainability and democratic control[143].

Importantly, the ecofeminist orientation advanced by the RWA situates food sovereignty within broader struggles for social and environmental justice. It recognises that sustainable transformation cannot occur without dismantling intersecting systems of oppression.

Language, Power and the Risk of Co-option

A significant challenge confronting civic mobilisation is the co-option of transformative language. Terms such as "agroecology," "just transition" and "sustainability" are increasingly incorporated into corporate and multilateral frameworks without addressing structural drivers of inequality.

This phenomenon risks depoliticising systemic critiques. Without vigilance, civic participation can be absorbed into reformist agendas that preserve corporate dominance. Effective coalition-building, therefore, requires clarity of analysis and shared values concerning redistribution, decommodification and ecological justice.

The strength of civic mobilisation lies not only in numbers but in narrative coherence. Contesting dominant paradigms is integral to advancing the right to food.

Conclusion: Civic Power as a Precondition for the Right to Food

In a context marked by persistently high unemployment, rising food prices and climate volatility, organised social movements have become essential actors in defending and advancing the right to food. They operate across multiple terrains—legal, political, economic and discursive—while simultaneously constructing viable alternatives.

Civic mobilisation transforms the right to food from an aspirational constitutional provision into lived reality. Through collective organisation, marginalised communities assert agency, demand accountability and shape the direction of food system transformation.

The power of civic mobilisation lies in its capacity to bridge constitutional norms and everyday practice. Without organised constituencies, the right to food risks remaining nominal. With sustained mobilisation, it becomes actionable, enforceable and transformative.

Theme 7: Recommendations

1. Constitutional Implementation of the Right to Food

[141] TCOE. (2021). Annual Report.
[142] TCOE. (2023). Annual Report.
[143] Bennie, L., et al. (2023). Visions for sustainability transition in South Africa's food system

South Africa produces sufficient food, yet hunger persists due to structural inequality. The key demand is full implementation of the constitutional right to food (Sections 27 and 28) through:

- Framing all food policies within a human rights and accountability framework
- Establishing measurable national and municipal monitoring systems to assess whether the right to food is being realised
- Strengthening public accountability mechanisms, including public hearings and civic oversight
- Developing a coordinated national legislative or Presidential framework to monitor food system governance

2. Equitable Access to Land, Water and Secure Tenure

- Accelerate equitable land redistribution and agrarian reform
- Secure tenure for small-scale producers, especially women in communal areas
- End farm evictions and unlawful removals
- Legislate and enforce Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) before community land is allocated to investors
- Address patriarchal practices that exclude women from land access
- Ensure affordable and equitable water rights for irrigation and domestic use
- Stop privatisation and mismanagement of municipal water systems
- Invest in repair and maintenance of water infrastructure

3. Recognition and Full Support for Agroecology

- Formal recognition of agroecology in national and provincial policy
- Public funding for agroecological training, hubs, farmer-to-farmer exchanges and extension services
- Implementation of the Climate Change Act (2024) to reduce emissions in agriculture
- Investment in climate-resilient production systems
- Reducing reliance on toxic agro-inputs and protecting farm workers from pesticide exposure
- Supporting indigenous livestock breeds and biodiversity restoration

4. Seed Sovereignty and Protection of Farmer-Managed Seed Systems

- Protect and strengthen Farmer-Managed Seed Systems (FMSS)
- Support indigenous seed rehabilitation and community seed banks
- Reform seed legislation that marginalises small-scale producers
- Recognise and domesticate UNDROP protections into South African law

- Increase farmer education on seed saving (including distinctions between hybrids and open-pollinated varieties)
- Resist exclusive reliance on GM and hybrid seeds

5. Market Justice and Short Food Chains

- Break monopolistic control of food retail markets
- Ensure fair pricing mechanisms where producers have bargaining power
- Support farmer-led markets and short supply chains
- Invest in infrastructure: storage, cooling facilities, transport and processing
- Reduce transport costs and improve rural road access
- Integrate small-scale and PGS-certified producers into public procurement (e.g., school feeding schemes)
- Recognise and support Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) as legitimate local certification models

6. Strengthening Farmer and Consumer Organisation

- Recognise farmer organisations as part of public food system infrastructure
- Provide administrative and technical support to producer organisations
- Strengthen trade union protections for farm workers and workers along supply chains
- Support independent consumer rights structures focused on food quality and transparency
- Promote participatory governance platforms at municipal level
- Ensure communities are included in municipal water and food planning processes

Social Protection and Structural Economic Reform

- Expand and strengthen social protection measures
- Address budget cuts affecting rural development and service delivery
- Challenge unregulated free market assumptions in food provisioning
- Address national debt constraints and policy conditionalities that undermine food sovereignty
- Democratise digital systems and protect farmer data sovereignty
- Ensure equitable access to digital infrastructure and agricultural technology

Gender Justice and Protection from Violence

- Secure women's independent land rights
- Support campaigns such as "One Woman, One Hectare"

- Address gender-based violence linked to land and production conflicts
- Establish safe spaces and healing mechanisms for women
- Recognise intersectionality (race, class, gender, migration status) in policy design

Climate, Biodiversity and Environmental Accountability

- Enforce environmental protections under Section 24 of the Constitution
- Increase oversight of water contamination and soil degradation
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions from industrial agriculture
- Promote biodiversity restoration and indigenous systems
- Hold corporations legally accountable for environmental harm throughout supply chains

I) Theme 8: Climate change and the South African food system

Climate impacts, which are already disrupting multiple dimensions of the food system, will have important implications for meeting the right to food. The food system is both a major contributor to climate change and highly vulnerable to its impacts, with Southern Africa already facing warming at close to twice the global average.[144] This section explores how these intersecting climate pressures are already reshaping water availability, farming conditions and food production, revealing the depth of vulnerability across the agri-food system and placing growing pressure on food security.

Sub-section 1 explores climate impacts at the production level, including water scarcity, soil degradation and crop sensitivity. Sub-section 2 examines impacts on the food system workforce highlighting how climate shocks intersect with existing precarity and inequality. Sub-section 3 considers vulnerabilities that exist along the food system supply chain, beyond the production level. Sub-section 4 discusses how food system mitigation efforts, when grounded in agroecology and farmer-led transitions, can simultaneously reduce emissions while strengthening resilience and food security. Finally, Sub-section 5 outlines pathways toward a just transition in South Africa's food system and presents priority policy recommendations aimed at advancing ecological sustainability, decent work and meaningful access to nutritious food.

Climate impacts on food production

South Africa is a water-scarce country projected to experience increasingly unreliable rainfall under climate change, with rising temperatures accelerating evaporation and altering rainfall patterns. These shifts are expected to drive longer droughts in the south-western regions and more intense rainfall along the east coast, placing additional pressure on already limited water resources.[145] Because over 90% of agriculture is rainfed, changes in rainfall translate directly into production risk, leaving most farming systems highly exposed to climate variability.[146] This exposure is further compounded by declining soil organic matter and deteriorating soil structure across large areas of cultivated land, which reduce water retention and increase drought sensitivity.[147]

This vulnerability is further shaped by crop composition: maize, South Africa's most important staple and accounting for 46% of total crop area, is highly sensitive to extreme heat and low

[144] Tubiello, F., C. Rosenzweig, G. Conchedda, K. Karl, J. Gütschow, X. Pan, G. Griffiths Obli-Laryea, S. Qiu, J. De Barrios, A. Flammini, E. Mencos Contreras, L. Souza, R. Quadrelli, H.H. Heiðarsdóttir, P. Benoit, M. Hayek, and D. Sandalow, 2021: Greenhouse gas emissions from food systems: Building the evidence base. Environ. Res. Lett., 16, no. 6, 065007, doi:10.1088/1748-9326/ac018e.
Hoegh-Guldberg, O., D. Jacob, M. Taylor, et al. , 2018: Impacts of 1.5ºC Global Warming on Natural and Human Systems. In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty

[145] Trisos, C.H., I.O. Adelekan, E. Totin, A. Ayanlade, et al., 2022: Africa. In: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

[146] Van Niekerk A, Jarmain C and Goudriaan R 2018 An earth observation approach towards mapping irrigated area and quantifying water use by irrigated crops in South Africa Report No. TT 745/17 (Water Research Commission) (available at: www.wrc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/ mdocs/TT 745 Final Report reprint 25 05 18.pdf)

[147] Meadows, M.E. and Hoffman, M.T. (2003) The nature, extent and causes of land degradation in South Africa: Legacy of the past, lessons for the future? Area, 35(4), 428–437.
Le Roux, J.J., Morgenthal, T.L., Malherbe, J., Pretorius, D.J. and Sumner, P.D. (2007) Water erosion prediction at a national scale for South Africa. Water SA, 33(3), 305–312.

rainfall, with climate extremes already shown to severely reduce yields and projected to become more frequent, posing direct risks to both domestic and regional food security.[148] These biophysical risks are amplified by dominant farming models that depend on synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and predictable weather patterns. Such input-intensive systems reduce ecological resilience and leave producers especially vulnerable to climatic shocks.[149]

Workforce impact

These production pressures translate directly into livelihood insecurity across the food system. Agriculture employs around 894,000 people,[150] many in seasonal, temporary or non-standard forms of work, leaving a large share of workers with limited income stability or social protection. Climate-related disruptions, including droughts, floods and yield losses, can therefore result in reduced working days, wage losses and heightened precarity for farm workers already operating at the margins of economic security. In addition, South Africa is home to approximately two million Black smallholder farmers, for whom even a single poor season can trigger debt accumulation, distress sales of assets, farm abandonment and localised food shortages.[151] The impacts extend beyond primary producers to informal traders and small-scale food distributors whose incomes depend on stable agricultural supply and affordable produce. When climate shocks reduce output or raise prices, the effects ripple through local markets, undermining livelihoods and weakening household food access.

Vulnerabilities in the wider food system

Beyond impacts at the production level, climate change disrupts the wider food system, contributing to rising food prices as vulnerabilities across supply chains deepen. The globalised nature of food systems further amplifies this risk, as dependence on international markets exposes countries to external shocks and price volatility,[152] meaning climate impacts in distant production regions can quickly affect local food availability and affordability. The implications of rising food prices are discussed further under Theme 1. Market concentration also creates centralised food systems that amplify climate risk, allowing disruptions at major nodes to cascade across supply chains while marginalising informal and small-scale traders and weakening local resilience (discussed further under Theme 2). At the household level, these pressures translate into increased unpaid care work for women, particularly around food provisioning, as families absorb climate-related shocks, reinforcing gendered inequalities in food security (discussed further under Theme 9).

Mitigation and food security

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[148] Bradshaw, Catherine D., Edward Pope, Gillian Kay, Jemma CS Davie, Andrew Cottrell, James Bacon, Adriana Cosse et al. “Unprecedented climate extremes in South Africa and implications for maize production”

[149] Altieri, M.A., Nicholls, C.I., Henao, A. and Lana, M.A. (2015) Agroecology and the design of climate change-resilient farming systems. Agronomy for Sustainable Development, 35, 869–890.
HLPE (High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition) (2019) Agroecological and Other Innovative Approaches for Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems. Rome: Committee on World Food Security.

[150] BFAP (2023). Agricultural Employment Brief: Interpreting the Quarterly Labour Force Survey from Stats SA. Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP), 5 October 2023.

[151] Aliber, M. and Hart, T. (2009) Should subsistence agriculture be supported as a strategy to address rural food insecurity? Agrekon, 48(4), 434–458.
Cousins, B. (2013) Smallholder irrigation schemes, agrarian reform and ‘accumulation from above and from below’ in South Africa. Journal of Agrarian Change, 13(1), 116–138.

[152] Clapp, J., 2017. Food self-sufficiency: Making sense of it, and when it makes sense. Food policy, 66, pp.88-96.

Mitigation is critical given that South Africa's food system contributes roughly 20% of national greenhouse gas emissions, yet it cannot be treated as a technical exercise divorced from food security and livelihoods. Emissions from the AFOLU (agriculture, forestry and other land uses) sector are driven largely by livestock production, particularly intensive feedlot systems, alongside high-input farming models,[153] while prevailing policy and investment patterns continue to prioritise productivity and intensification over mitigation and ecological sustainability.[154] Evidence shows that agroecological practices, including soil carbon restoration, diversified farming and improved grazing (see theme 5), can simultaneously reduce emissions, strengthen resilience, and support farmer livelihoods.[155] When grounded in ecological production and farmer-led transitions, mitigation can therefore directly advance food security while contributing to national climate commitments.

Toward a Just Transition in South Africa's Food System

South Africa's primary food security challenge lies not in national production volumes, but in inequality and access, pressures that are being sharply intensified by the climate crisis. Yet current agricultural policy responses remain largely focused on increasing production rather than building resilience and addressing structural vulnerability.[156] Both climate and agricultural policy must confront this reality. Climate change must be recognised as a structural driver of food insecurity and a direct threat to the constitutional right to food. Strengthening food security therefore requires a shift toward more localised and resilient food systems that reduce dependence on vulnerable global supply chains and prioritise meeting local nutritional needs. A just transition must sit at the centre of agricultural and food systems policy, advancing ecological sustainability alongside equity, livelihoods and meaningful access to nutritious food.

Theme 8: Recommendations

- *Integrate the food system fully into climate mitigation and adaptation planning and policy* - Ensure the food system is embedded in national climate mitigation frameworks (including NDC (Nationally Determined Contributions) processes), with clear sectoral targets aligned to national commitments, and in national and sector

[153] Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) (2017) Strategic Plan for the Smallholder Support Programme and Soil Conservation. Pretoria: DAFF.
IPCC (2022) Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.
Gerber, P.J., Steinfeld, H., Henderson, B., Mottet, A., Opio, C., Dijkman, J., Falcucci, A. and Tempio, G. (2013) Tackling Climate Change Through Livestock: A Global Assessment of Emissions and Mitigation Opportunities. Rome: FAO.
[154] FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) (2017) The Future of Food and Agriculture – Trends and Challenges. Rome: FAO.
Winkler, H., Marquard, A., Tyler, E. and Howells, M. (2021) Climate mitigation policy in South Africa: Progress and challenges. Climate Policy, 21(1), 1–14.
[155] Mbow, C., Smith, P., Skole, D., Duguma, L. and Bustamante, M. (2014) Achieving mitigation and adaptation to climate change through sustainable agroforestry practices in Africa. Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability, 6, 8–14.
Reganold, J.P. and Wachter, J.M. (2016) Organic agriculture in the twenty-first century. Nature Plants, 2, 15221
Gattinger, A., Muller, A., Haeni, M., Skinner, C., Fliessbach, A., Buchmann, N., Mäder, P., Stolze, M., Smith, P., Scialabba, N.E.H. and Niggli, U. (2012) Enhanced top soil carbon stocks under organic farming. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 109, 18226–18231.
[156] National Planning Commission (2012) National Development Plan 2030. Pretoria: The Presidency.
Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) (2016) National Policy on Organic Production. Pretoria: Government of South Africa.
https://acbio.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FactS-05-ENG-Overview-of-CCAMP_Mobile_Fin.pdf

adaptation plans, both with meaningful participation of small-scale producers, workers, informal traders and agroecological practitioners in shaping just transition pathways.

- *Prioritise climate-resilient land use and agroecology within a just transition framework* - Protect productive agricultural land and mainstream agroecological practices across climate and agricultural policy, ensuring small-scale farmers are not burdened by compliance costs. End government distribution of GMO seed and synthetic agrochemicals, replacing them with agroecological inputs and biological alternatives, and expand access to indigenous and climate-resilient crops such as sorghum and millet.
- *Realign incentives away from industrial livestock and high-input farming toward regenerative mixed systems* - Reform policies that currently favour grain-fed feedlots and input-intensive production. Prioritise regenerative grazing, integrated crop-livestock systems, soil carbon restoration and diversified farming that strengthen ecosystems, improve nutrition outcomes and support rural livelihoods.
- *Develop a National Small-Scale Farmer Climate Adaptation Strategy* - Establish a dedicated adaptation plan with clear budgets, timelines and targets, fully integrated into South Africa's climate response framework.
- *Create a Climate Resilience Fund for Small-Scale Farmers* - Provide accessible grants for water harvesting, solar-powered irrigation and drought-resilient seeds, with simplified applications and delivery through farmer networks and cooperatives.
- *Establish a national agroecological extension and training programme* - Train extension officers in soil health, biological pest control and diversified farming, shift advisory services away from input supply, and support farmer-to-farmer learning and demonstration farms.
- *Launch a national soil restoration programme* - Scale composting through municipal organic waste partnerships, restore soil organic matter, reduce erosion, alleviate landfill pressure and reduce landfill-based methane emissions via coordinated local implementation.
- *Invest in local food systems, decentralised markets and territorial food strategies* - Support municipal food resilience planning, strengthen local markets and short supply chains, and stabilise farm incomes through territorial food systems that connect producers, traders and communities, while reducing transport and storage-related emissions.
- *Strengthen decent work and climate resilience across the food system* - Extend adaptation planning beyond primary production to include farm workers, informal traders, and food retail and processing workers. Establish climate-resilient labour protections (including heat standards, income support during shocks and safe working conditions), recognise informal food traders as essential workers, and invest in worker-led and community-based food distribution systems that sustain livelihoods while improving access to affordable, nutritious food.
- *Centre households, care and social protection within food system adaptation* - Recognise households as frontline sites of climate adaptation by strengthening social protection, reducing women's unpaid care burdens, and supporting community food initiatives and informal food networks. Adaptation planning must include measures for food provisioning, labour redistribution and care infrastructure alongside production, retail and livelihood interventions.

J) Theme 9: Gender as a Cross-Cutting Vector in Advancing the Right to Food

Introduction: Gender, Power, and the Right to Food

The right to sufficient food, protected under Section 27(1)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, is inseparable from broader questions of power, inequality, and structural exclusion. Gender functions as a cross-cutting vector shaping both vulnerability to food insecurity and the capacity to claim rights. Women, particularly Black African women in rural, peri-urban, and informal settlement contexts, bear disproportionate responsibility for food provisioning while facing systemic barriers to land ownership, income, productive resources, and decision-making power.[157]

The SAHRC's Right to Food Inquiry Concept Note highlights structural inequality, governance fragmentation, corporate concentration, and civic participation as key thematic areas. Across each of these, gender shapes how rights violations occur and how resistance emerges. Women are not only disproportionately affected by food insecurity but are also central actors in community food systems, informal economies, agroecological production, and social mobilisation.[158]

The different organisations and movements, namely, Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE), alongside allied movements such as the Rural Woman's Assembly, Mawubuye Land Rights Movement and Inyanda National Land Movement, has documented through its annual reports and community processes that women are the backbone of food sovereignty organising. Their participation reflects both necessity and political agency. Gender must therefore be understood not merely as a demographic category but as a structural determinant of both rights violations and rights realisation.

Structural Inequality, Gendered Poverty, and Economic Exclusion

South Africa's food system reflects the enduring legacy of racialised and gendered dispossession. Colonial and apartheid land policies excluded Black women from land ownership and relegated them to unpaid subsistence labour or precarious agricultural wage labour.[159] These patterns persist in contemporary economic structures.

Female-headed households experience significantly higher rates of food insecurity and poverty.[160] This is not incidental but reflects systemic barriers including unequal wages, limited employment opportunities, and disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities. Women are overrepresented in informal food economies, including street vending and small-scale production, yet remain excluded from formal value chains dominated by large corporate actors.[161]

These inequalities do not simply marginalise women; they structurally and systematically produce gendered poverty through interlocking systems of patriarchy and capitalism, embedded in law, markets, customary practices, and state policy. Women are denied equal

[157] South African Human Rights Commission. (2023). National Report on the Right to Food.
[158] Trust for Community Outreach and Education. (2022–2024). Annual Reports: Food Sovereignty Programme.
[159] Walker, C. (2001). Land reform in South Africa and gender.
[160] Statistics South Africa. (2023). *General Household Survey*
[161] Battersby, J. (2017). Informal food economies and food security

access to land, income, and productive resources, yet are simultaneously burdened with primary responsibility for household nutrition and social reproduction. In this context, gendered poverty is both a cause and consequence of food insecurity, reproduced across generations as land, wealth, and decision-making power remain concentrated in male-dominated and corporate-controlled structures. Advancing women's rights to land is therefore a political and material intervention that confronts both patriarchy and capitalism, reclaims land as a site of economic justice, and redistributes power within food systems.

Corporate Concentration and Gendered Exclusion

Corporate consolidation across agricultural production, processing, and retail has deepened inequality and marginalised small-scale producers, particularly women.[162] Supermarket procurement systems favour large-scale, capital-intensive producers, creating barriers for women farmers who often lack access to land, credit, and infrastructure.[163]

Women informal traders, who play a critical role in community food access, face regulatory exclusion, harassment, and lack of institutional recognition. Yet these informal food economies provide accessible and affordable food to low-income communities.[164]

Corporate capture also influences dietary patterns through the proliferation of ultra-processed foods in low-income communities. Women, as caregivers responsible for household food provisioning, must navigate rising food costs and declining nutritional quality, reinforcing cycles of malnutrition and poverty.[165]

Corporate accountability must therefore be assessed through a gender lens, recognising how market concentration disproportionately excludes women producers and undermines community food sovereignty.

Land, Agrarian Reform, and Gender Justice

Land access remains foundational to the substantive realisation of the right to food. In South Africa's historically racialised and gendered agrarian structure, women's land access continues to be mediated by discriminatory customary practices, bureaucratic gatekeeping, and the absence of consistently implemented gender-responsive land reform frameworks.[166] Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, land tenure in communal and redistributed contexts often reproduces patriarchal authority, positioning women as derivative or secondary rights holders rather than autonomous claimants to land. The result is not merely symbolic exclusion but material deprivation: insecure tenure constrains women's ability to access credit, agricultural extension, markets, and state-supported production schemes.[167]

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[162] Greenberg, S. (2017). Corporate concentration in South African food systems

[163] Food and Agriculture Organization. (2011). Women in Agriculture Report.

[164] Skinner, C. (2019). Informal sector policy and food systems

[165] Baker, P., et al. (2020). Nutrition transition and ultra-processed foods.

[166] Hall, R. (2011). Land reform in South Africa: Emerging policy debates. PLAAS, University of the Western Cape. See also: Claassens, A., & Cousins, B. (2008). Land, power and custom: Controversies generated by South Africa's Communal Land Rights Act. UCT Press.

[167] O'Laughlin, B., Bernstein, H., & Cousins, B. (2013). Agrarian reform in South Africa: The politics of redistribution and restitution. Journal of Agrarian Change, 13(1), 1–25. See also: Walker, C. (2003). Piety in the sky? Gender policy and land reform in South Africa. Journal of Agrarian Change, 3(1–2), 113–148.

Women's land insecurity must be situated within the broader agrarian political economy that continues to structure ownership, production, and accumulation in South Africa. Post-apartheid land reform has not fundamentally disrupted patterns of land concentration or agrarian capital accumulation; rather, redistribution has largely proceeded within market-led frameworks that preserve entrenched land and gendered hierarchies embedded in rural land relations.[168] This continuity reflects not only the persistence of patriarchal authority within customary and private tenure systems, but the dominance of capitalism as the organising system of the agrarian economy, in which land is treated primarily as a commodity and vehicle for accumulation rather than a livelihood resource. Corporate capture and the consolidation of power by agribusiness corporations, commercial farmers, and allied financial elites further entrench this trajectory, as these actors exercise disproportionate influence over policy direction, subsidy allocation, land valuation frameworks, seed regulation, and market access, thereby privileging commercial profitability, export competitiveness, and investor protection over redistributive justice, gender equity, and food sovereignty.

Women's exclusion from secure land rights/ tenure is therefore not incidental but systematically reproduced at the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism, constraining transformative agrarian reform and undermining the substantive realisation of the right to food. Yet, rural women remain central actors within small-scale agriculture and agroecological production systems. Empirical evidence from movement documentation and annual reporting by the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) and the Rural Women's Assembly South Africa (RWA SA) demonstrates that women consistently anchor community food production campaigns, seed-saving networks, and agroecological training processes.[169] These practices are not peripheral subsistence activities but constitute territorially grounded food systems that sustain household nutrition, preserve biodiversity, and strengthen climate resilience in contexts of ecological volatility.

It is within this structural and political context that the Rural Women's Assembly South Africa's One Woman, One Hectare (1W1H) campaign must be understood. The campaign advances a redistributive proposition: that each rural woman should have access to at least one hectare of productive land under secure tenure as a matter of rights and structural transformation.[170] One Woman, One Hectare is not framed as welfare or incremental reform; rather, it intervenes directly in the agrarian structure by asserting women as primary land rights holders. It challenges both patriarchal land governance and the concentration of land ownership, positioning women's access to land as a precondition for food sovereignty, economic autonomy, and substantive equality.

Crucially, 1W1H links land redistribution to agroecological transformation and seed sovereignty. This reflects alignment with international human rights standards, particularly the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), which affirms the rights to land, natural resources, seeds, and food

[168] Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE). (2023). Annual Report. Cape Town: TCOE. Rural Women's Assembly South Africa (RWA SA). (2024). Programme and Campaign Report: Agroecology, Land and Food Sovereignty. Cape Town: RWA SA.
[169] Rural Women's Assembly South Africa (RWA SA). (2023). One Woman One Hectare Campaign Framework Document. Cape Town: RWA SA.
[170] Rural Women's Assembly South Africa (RWA SA). (2023). One Woman One Hectare campaign framework document. Cape Town: RWA SA.

sovereignty.[171] The campaign thus situates land access within a broader framework of collective territorial rights and ecologically sustainable production systems. Secure tenure, when combined with access to water, inputs, markets, infrastructure, and extension support, enables women to scale production, generate income, and reconfigure local economies away from extractive and exclusionary models.

Gender-responsive land reform must therefore move beyond formal equality toward redistributive justice. This requires explicit recognition of women as independent land rights holders, targeted financial and technical support mechanisms, and a restructuring of agrarian policy to prioritise small-scale agroecological producers.[172] Without deliberate structural interventions such as One Woman, One Hectare, the interlocking crises of landlessness, food insecurity, and gendered economic exclusion will persist. Scaling such initiatives requires not only technical support but structural policy shifts: public procurement reform to prioritise small-scale agroecological producers; gender-responsive land allocation targets; and budgetary reallocation toward redistributive agrarian reform.

Policy transformation is imperative if agrarian reform is to move beyond incremental redistribution toward systemic restructuring. South Africa's agricultural policy environment remains oriented toward input-intensive commercial production, export competitiveness, and corporate seed systems, reinforcing concentrated systems of landholding dominated by agribusiness, large-scale commercial farmers, and financial actors. A transformative agenda must therefore differentiate and reorganise systems of landholding by restoring equitable landholding patterns, disrupting excessive concentration, and strengthening secure tenure for small-scale producers, particularly women. This requires confronting the monocropping model that underpins industrial agriculture, accelerates ecological degradation, and marginalises biodiverse, community-based food systems.

A gender-responsive agroecological transition would entail the formal recognition of agroecology within national agricultural policy frameworks; the restructuring of public financing to prioritise small-scale and women-led production; and the integration of agroecological extension services within provincial departments of agriculture.[173] Such measures demand not marginal policy adjustments but a reimagining of the support architecture, research, procurement, credit, infrastructure, and market access, so that smallholder agroecological agriculture can thrive as a foundation for food sovereignty, ecological sustainability, and substantive gender justice.

Furthermore, seed governance reform is critical. Current regulatory regimes, including plant breeders' rights and seed certification frameworks, privilege commercial seed companies while marginalising farmer-managed seed systems. Policy reform must therefore safeguard farmers' rights to save, exchange, and develop indigenous seeds, in line with UNDROP Articles 19 and 20 and international commitments under the International Treaty on Plant

[171] United Nations General Assembly. (2018). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (A/RES/73/165).
[172] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (2011). The state of food and agriculture 2010–2011: Women in agriculture—Closing the gender gap for development. FAO.
[173] Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD). (2019). National policy on agroecology (draft framework for consultation). Pretoria: DALRRD.

Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), to which South Africa recently acceded.[174]

Indivisible Rights and Gendered Care Economies

The right to food is materially grounded in equitable access to land, water, housing, healthcare, and social security.[175] Food insecurity emerges where these rights are unevenly realised and where land dispossession constrains productive autonomy through both structural and institutional arrangements that regulate ownership, labour markets, and access to public resources. Women's disproportionate responsibility within gendered care economies means that institutional failures in land reform, public service delivery, and employment creation are absorbed through intensified unpaid labour and informal survival strategies.[176] Women's reliance on social grants, particularly the Child Support Grant, is therefore directly connected to the absence of secure land rights and productive assets.[177] In contexts of landlessness, women are deprived of the material base necessary to produce food, generate income, and build economic resilience, reinforcing dependence on social protection as a compensatory mechanism within an unequal system. While grants remain indispensable in mitigating hunger, they do not alter institutionalised patterns of ownership or redistribute economic power. The realisation of the right to food thus requires confronting both structural and institutional drivers of landlessness and advancing transformative redistribution of land, resources, and decision-making authority.

Indigenous Knowledge, Agroecology, and Women's Leadership

Women are custodians of indigenous agricultural knowledge, seed systems, and agroecological practices. These knowledge systems sustain biodiversity, climate resilience, and nutritional diversity.[178]

Agroecology offers a pathway toward food sovereignty by reducing dependence on external inputs, strengthening local food systems, and enhancing community resilience.[179] The Rural Women's Assembly of South Africa's programmes demonstrate that women farmers play leadership roles in agroecological transitions, knowledge exchange, and community education.[180]

Despite this, agricultural policy continues to prioritise industrial production models that marginalise agroecological approaches and undervalue women's knowledge. Recognising agroecology as a legitimate and supported pathway requires centring women's leadership and knowledge systems.

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[174] United Nations General Assembly. (2018). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (A/RES/73/165). Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2001). International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. FAO.
[175] United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (1999). General Comment 12.
[176] O'Laughlin, B. (2007). Gender and livelihood systems.
[177] Department of Social Development. (2023). Social grants statistical review
[178] Biowatch South Africa. (2022). Agroecology and seed sovereignty report
[179] Altieri, M., & Nicholls, C. (2017). Agroecology and resilience
[180] Trust for Community Outreach and Education. (2023). Annual Report.

Systemic Governance Failures and Gendered Accountability Gaps

Governance fragmentation undermines effective realisation of the right to food. Responsibility is dispersed across multiple departments without coherent coordination or accountability.[181]

Gender-responsive monitoring mechanisms remain limited. Data collection often fails to capture women's lived experiences, informal economic contributions, and caregiving labour.[182]

This invisibility contributes to policy failure. Without gender-disaggregated indicators and meaningful participation mechanisms, governance systems cannot adequately address food insecurity.

Civic Participation, Public Accountability, and Social Movements

Civic participation is central to advancing the right to food. Social movements, particularly those led by rural and working-class women, play a critical role in claiming rights, challenging structural inequality, and holding the state accountable.[183]

Women's participation in food sovereignty movements reflects both necessity and political leadership. Through community organising, women challenge land dispossession, corporate exclusion, and governance failures.[184] These movements create spaces for democratic participation, collective learning, and accountability.

RWA experience demonstrates that women-led civic mobilisation strengthens community food systems, promotes agroecology, and advances rights-based approaches to food governance.[185]

Participation transforms women from passive recipients of food aid into active rights claimants. Public accountability mechanisms must therefore support and protect civic participation.

The SAHRC Inquiry presents a critical opportunity to strengthen participatory governance by institutionalising mechanisms for community monitoring, movement participation, and gender-responsive accountability.

Conclusion: Gender Justice as Foundational to the Right to Food

The violation and realisation of the right to food must be understood within the intersecting systems of capitalism and patriarchy which structure ownership, governance, and access to productive resources. Corporate capture, concentrated landholding, and the consolidation of agribusiness power have narrowed democratic control over food systems, while limited access to land, water, financial resources, and technical support operate as institutional and structural barriers that reproduce exclusion. These constraints disproportionately affect women, who experience compounded dispossession through patriarchal land relations and capital-intensive agricultural models that privilege commercial farmers and corporate elites.

[181] Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation. (2022). Food security coordination review.
[182] National Treasury. (2023). Gender-responsive budgeting framework.
[183] Patel, R. (2009). Food sovereignty and social movements.
[184] Moyo, S., & Yeros, P. (2005). Land and social movements
[185] Trust for Community Outreach and Education. (2024). Annual Report.

A transformative approach requires:
• Secure and independent land tenure rights for women;
• Dismantling corporate capture and ensuring corporate accountability within food systems;
• Equitable access to land, water, financial resources, and technical support for small-scale producers;
• Public recognition and sustained investment in agroecology as a viable production system;
• Gender-responsive and democratically accountable governance and monitoring mechanisms;
• Protection and strengthening of civic participation and social movements within agrarian and food policy spaces.

The realisation of the right to food therefore demands structural transformation that confronts corporate power, redistributes resources, and reorients food systems toward justice, sovereignty, and democratic control.

Theme 9: Recommendations

Formal Recognition and Public Investment in Agroecology

- Public funding, research, and extension services must prioritise small-scale and women-led farming systems.
- Institutional support must shift away from industrial, throughput-driven agricultural models toward care-centred, biodiverse systems.
- State support programmes must allow farmers to determine the type of assistance they require rather than imposing standardised industrial input packages.

Women's Independent and Secure Access to Land

- Land reform must prioritise women's independent land rights, not derivative access through male relatives.
- Secure tenure arrangements must replace insecure Permission to Occupy systems.
- Traditional authorities must be subject to oversight mechanisms to prevent arbitrary evictions and discriminatory land allocation.
- Legal literacy and land rights education must be expanded for women farmers.
- Rural development and agrarian reform policies must explicitly address gender disparities in land access.

Implementation of UNDROP and Rights-Based Governance

- National food system governance must ensure meaningful participation of grassroots women's movements beyond symbolic consultation.
- Transparent monitoring systems with measurable indicators must track implementation.
- Gender equity must be embedded across all food system policy frameworks.

Reform of Market Structures and Corporate Concentration

- Address corporate concentration in the food value chain.
- Expand fair-pricing mechanisms accessible to small-scale producers.
- Support women's participation in agro-processing and value chains.
- Invest in infrastructure to reduce post-harvest losses (storage, processing facilities, transport).

Support for Indigenous Seed Systems and Biodiversity

- Recognise and support small-scale and indigenous seed systems, which are usually led by women.
- Invest in community-level storage and seed infrastructure.
- Align seed and research systems with small-scale agroecological production.

Rural Infrastructure Investment Targeting Women Producers

- Rural infrastructure investment (water access, irrigation, storage, roads, transport) must prioritise small-scale producers at village and cooperative level.
- Agricultural support must be responsive to women's realities rather than urban-industrial models.

K) Theme 10: Child Hunger and Malnutrition

Introduction

With a national food system characterized as being variety-deficient and a heavy reliance on commercially available food options, South Africa is currently grappling with a devastating "triple burden of malnutrition": the simultaneous persistence of undernutrition (stunting and wasting), micronutrient deficiencies (hidden hunger), and a rising tide of overweight and obesity. This paradox means that while many children do not get enough calories, many others are "overfed" on nutrient-poor, high-sodium & sugary foods because healthy staples are unaffordable and often not culturally appropriate.

Despite the President's SONA 2026 commitments to eliminate stunting by 2030 and to focus attention on the first 1000 days, little has changed for children in South Africa.[186]

If Children are truly the greatest asset of a nation, South Africa has done poorly to protect its children. We continue to relegate children to the last item on the agenda. Children will continue to pay with their lives, with ill-health and loss of potential now, and into their adult years. This loss of potential, quality of life, and years of life lost to disease is an indictment of children and a violation of their rights.

The Triple burden of malnutrition

- **Systemic Failure:** Stunting rates have remained stagnant at over 25% for the last decade. Approximately 29% of children under five are currently stunted, and over 60% of four-year-olds are not meeting developmental milestones.[187] Stunting is a universal indicator of health, development, and economics. While stunting stays unchanged, South Africa's human capital lies wasted for years to come.
- **The "Triple Burden" of Malnutrition:** South Africa faces a simultaneous crisis of undernutrition (stunting and wasting), micronutrient deficiencies (hidden hunger), and rising obesity due to a reliance on nutrient-poor, highly processed "poverty foods".[188]
- **The Critical Window:** The first 1000 days (pregnancy through the first two years) are a limited window for building healthy bodies and brains. This period constitutes the 270 days of pregnancy and the 730 days of the child's first 2 years of life. Once lost to neglect, the country's human development index regresses.[189] Breast milk should not be substituted for dairy-based bottled milk, as the health implications could be astronomical. Research on lactose intolerance (specifically lactase non-persistence) in South Africa indicates that the prevalence among Black African populations is high, generally estimated between 78% and 90%.[190]

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[186] Department of Basic Education. (2026, February 12). *SONA 2026 - Department of Basic Education*. https://www.education.gov.za/ArchivedDocuments/ArchivedArticles/SONA2026

[187] Wand, H., Naidoo, S., Govender, V., Reddy, T., & Moodley, J. (2024). Preventing stunting in South African children under 5: Evaluating the combined impacts of maternal characteristics and low socioeconomic conditions. *Journal of Prevention*, *45*(3), 339–355. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-024-00766-2

[188] Simelane, M., et al. (2024). *National Food and Nutrition Security Survey: National Report*. (Preprint/Source: ResearchGate/Ilifa Labantwana).

[189] Suri S, Verlato G, Ray S. Editorial: The first 1000 days: window of opportunity for child health and development. Front Nutr. 2025 Aug 18;12:1673003. doi: 10.3389/fnut.2025.1673003. PMID: 40901286; PMCID: PMC12400855.

[190] Vitalis, D., Witten, C., & Pérez-Escamilla, R. (2022). Gearing up to improve exclusive breastfeeding practices in South Africa. *PLOS ONE*, *17*(3), e0265012. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0265012

- **Economic Barriers:** The Child Support Grant is lower than the food poverty line, and the cost of basic food is higher than the grant itself, leaving households unable to afford adequate nutrition.[191]
- **Cost to human and economic capital:** South Africa is losing human and economic capital by neglecting its children. Poor health results in lost opportunities to engage and learn, which in turn results in learners repeating or failing grades at school. All the resources ploughed into children after age 6 are an opportunity cost of not acting early and during that critical window of the first 1000 days.[192]
- **Slow Violence and lack of empathy towards humans and animals:** chronic malnutrition during this window acts as a "toxic stressor." This disrupts the development of the emotional brain, leading to persistent hyper-vigilance and a diminished capacity for emotional regulation, which are precursors to aggressive behaviour and a lack of empathy in later childhood.[193]
- **Regional Emergency:** In the Alfred Nzo district alone, 1,722 children under five were newly diagnosed with severe acute malnutrition between August 2022 and September 2023.[194]

Recommendations

- **Constitutional Oversight:** Immediately activate a National Food Security and Nutrition Advisory Council to ensure intersectoral coordination and robust monitoring of child stunting.
- **Grant Realignment:** Adjust the Child Support Grant to align with or exceed the food poverty line to ensure caregivers can buy sufficient food of adequate quality.

Breastfeeding Barriers and Maternity Protection

- **Policy Neglect:** Despite the critical importance of the first 1,000 days, maternity protection has been neglected. Breastfeeding environments in most workplaces are inadequate or unsupportive.[195]
- **Inadequate Leave:** Paid maternity leave is currently limited to only four months, which is insufficient to support the World Health Organization's recommendation of six months of exclusive breastfeeding.[196]
- **Exclusion of the Vulnerable:** Unemployed women and those working in the informal sector are ineligible to access the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF),

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[191] Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. (2023). Reducing child poverty: A review of child poverty and the value of the child support grant. [Report commissioned by the National Department of Social Development].

[192] May, J., Witten, C., Lake, Lor, & Skelton, A. (2021). Slow violence of Malnutrition. In J. May, C. Witten, & Lori Lake (Eds.), *Child Gauge 2020* (pp. 24–46). University of Cape Town

[193] Donald, K. A. (2013). *Biological risks to child development in the first 1000 days*. Ilifa Labantwana. https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ResearchPolicy-Brief_Toxic-stress_WebFinal.pdf

[194] South African Human Rights Commission. (2023, November). *Report of the South African Human Rights Commission: Inquiry into the right to food and child malnutrition in the Eastern Cape*. https://www.sahrc.org.za/

[195] Vitalis, D., Witten, C., & Pérez-Escamilla, R. (2022). Gearing up to improve exclusive breastfeeding practices in South Africa. *PLOS ONE*, *17*(3), e0265012. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0265012

[196] May, J., Witten, C., Lake, Lor, & Skelton, A. (2021). Slow violence of Malnutrition. In J. May, C. Witten, & Lori Lake (Eds.), *Child Gauge 2020* (pp. 24–46). University of Cape Town.

forcing many to return to work prematurely and adopt inappropriate infant feeding practices.[197]

Recommendations

- **Expand Maternity Benefits:** Extend paid maternity leave and ensure that women in the informal sector are eligible for UIF or equivalent social protection to support optimal breastfeeding.
- **Workplace Support:** Legislate and enforce requirements for supportive breastfeeding environments (private spaces and time breaks) in all workplaces.
- **Global Guidance:** As government makes headway in prioritizing Early Child Development, and renewed efforts to provide mothers with affordable, high-quality proteins from meat and meat-sources, it is imperative to view this initiative through the global guidance on climate change and sustainable agricultural systems of a plant-based diet, and affordability in the context of deepening poverty in South Africa.
- **Robust Systems:** As a first call, South Africa's Food Security and Nutrition Council must be constituted and activated to allow for intersectoral collaboration, an evidence-informed food security system that serves the youngest and most vulnerable people of South Africa, and a robust monitoring system to track and inform programme planners and implementers of progress.

Strengthening the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)

- **Operational Challenges:** The NSNP is hampered by centralized procurement, payment delays, and inadequate infrastructure. The last national evaluation was nearly a decade ago (2016).[198]
- **Nutritional Deficits:** Many meals fall short of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for energy and essential micronutrients like zinc and calcium.[199]

Recommendations

- **National Evaluation:** Conduct a comprehensive national evaluation and impact assessment of the NSNP to rectify performance gaps.
- **Menu Reform:** Prioritize indigenous, climate-resilient dark-green leafy vegetables (e.g., spinach, morogo) and orange vegetables (e.g., carrots, orange-fleshed sweet potato, pumpkin) to combat hidden hunger.
- **Curriculum Integration:** Formally integrate the use and maintenance of school gardens into the school curriculum to foster long-term food sovereignty.
- **Procurement Quotas:** Legislate local procurement quotas to ensure at least 30% of food is sourced from local smallholders and agroecological farmers. Provide the necessary support to smallholders to enable them to fill these quotas.

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[197] World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, & World Bank Group. (2018). *World Health Organization, UNICEF, World Bank Group. Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential*.

[198] Yeni, S. (2026). *Smallholder farmers, school food gardens and South Africa's NSNP*.

[199] Singo, N. P., Fanadzo, M., & Belete, A. S. (2021). Assessment of the nutritional status of four selected rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Nutrients*, *13*(9), 2920. https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13092920

Agroecology and School Food Gardens

The Sustainable Food Production pillar—the third pillar of the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)—is widely recognized by researchers and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) as the most neglected and under-resourced component of the scheme.

- **Strategic Intervention:** Agroecological gardens provide fresh, healthy, and indigenous food directly to school kitchens while teaching learners practical methods like intercropping and organic composting.
- **Funding Gaps:** This pillar of the NSNP is currently chronically underfunded and under-supported. While the feeding pillar receives the vast majority of the NSNP conditional grant, the food production pillar (school gardens) often lacks dedicated funding, technical expertise, and infrastructure.[200]
- **Budget Disparity:** Financial analysis shows a massive imbalance in resource allocation. According to the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security (2018), approximately 96% of the NSNP budget is dedicated strictly to school feeding (procurement and preparation), leaving negligible funds for the other two pillars: Nutrition Education and Sustainable Food Production.[201] [202]
- **Implementation Gap:** Despite the mandate, many schools lack the necessary resources to maintain gardens. Research indicates that less than half of the schools participating in the NSNP have a functional food garden (DST-NRF, 2018).[203] [204]
- **Lack of Prioritization:** Recent reviews highlight that "efforts to improve food production and nutrition education are not prioritized" compared to the immediate logistical demands of daily feeding (PMC, 2025). This results in gardens that are often seasonal, poorly maintained, or entirely dependent on sporadic NGO support rather than sustainable government funding.
- **Resource Constraints:** Schools frequently cite lack of water infrastructure (boreholes), garden tools, seeds, and specialized labor (gardeners) as primary barriers. While the DBE "encourages" gardens, the NSNP Grant Framework does not always provide the capital required for the initial setup in the poorest schools (Quintiles 1–3).

Recommendations

- **Infrastructure Investment:** Allocate specific budgets for school garden infrastructure, including fencing, tools, and water tanks for rainwater harvesting.

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[200] Yeni, S. (2026). *Smallholder farmers, school food gardens and South Africa's NSNP*.

[201] DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security. (2018). *School feeding in South Africa: What we know, what we don't know, what we need to know, what we need to do* (Working Paper Series No. 004). University of the Western Cape. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325828674

[202] Transforming South Africa's school nutrition programme for educational success: A review on challenges and prospects. (2025). *PMC*, PMC12605904. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12605904/

[203] DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security. (2018). *School feeding in South Africa: What we know, what we don't know, what we need to know, what we need to do* (Working Paper Series No. 004). University of the Western Cape. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325828674

[204] Transforming South Africa's school nutrition programme for educational success: A review on challenges and prospects. (2025). *PMC*, PMC12605904. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12605904/

- **Skills Transfer:** Fund partnerships with NGOs and lead farmers to transfer agroecological production skills to school committees and integrate these gardens into the curricula.
- **Locally produced food:** This initiative is further intended to strengthen the school nutrition program by ensuring the provision of healthier and locally produced food options that can be shared with the community.
- **Continuance of Cultural knowledge:** Encourage local farmers practising agroecology to share their working experiences with learners.

Regulatory and Market Interventions

- **Indigenous Crops:** Staples like pearl millet and sorghum are nutritionally superior to refined starches but remain underutilized.
- **Commercial Pressures:** Schools are often "markets" for industrial surplus, with children targeted by advertising for fast foods, dairy milk, high-sugar and high-salt foods.

Recommendations

- **VAT Exemptions:** Zero-rate indigenous crops such as pearl millet and sorghum to lower the price of high-protein, nutrient-dense foods.
- **Advertising Bans:** Enforce strict bans on advertising ultra-processed and fast foods to children to curb the obesity crisis.
- **Tuck Shop Oversight:** Empower School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to mandate strict nutritional and food safety guidelines for tuck shops and surrounding vendors.

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