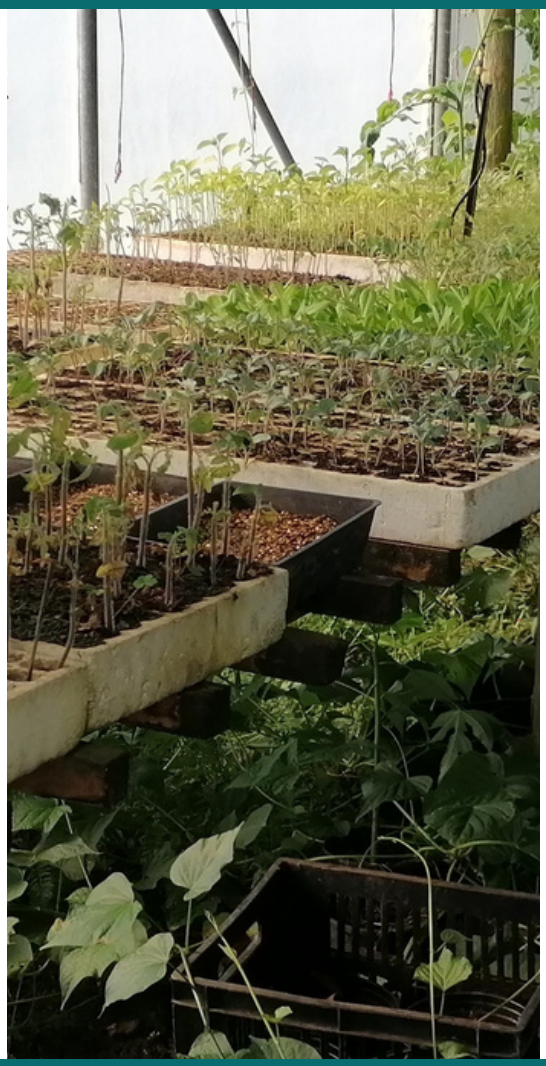
TAFS POLICY BRIEF #1

Transitions to Agroecological Food Systems in South Africa - Policy landscape and strategic opportunities







October 2022

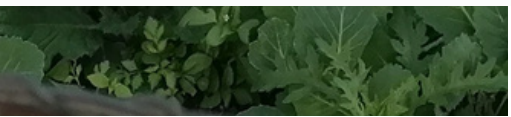
TAFS AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

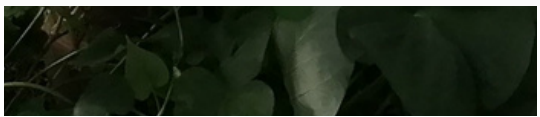
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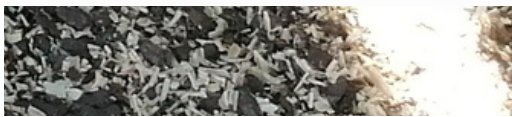
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Synopsis for an agroecology transition in South Africa

In South Africa, access to food and adequate nutrition is a right enshrined in the Constitution. Yet, hunger is rife and food access is a daily struggle for more than 14 million South Africans (23% of the population), with malnutrition in its various forms being a significant health challenge. In parallel, South African agriculture is increasingly unsustainable in the context of climate change and environmental degradation. Transforming the food system is imperative.

Current approaches to transformation are restricted to incremental adaptations to the dominant agricultural model, primarily using Conservation Agriculture (CA)/Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) approaches. While these may offer necessary pathways to greater environmental sustainability in commercial agriculture, they fall short of what is needed for transforming the food system.

To effectively address the sustainability crisis, a transformational change is needed where social dynamics must play a major role. This requires support for different producer categories, the development of new food networks supporting local food system dynamics, and improved participation based on consumer-producer collaboration. Progress must be cross-sectoral, throughout the food system, and at multiple levels simultaneously. An agroecological approach can recalibrate this system to achieve both ecological sustainability and social justice.

South Africa is in a position to consolidate these opportunities. Numerous policies, plans and programmes have elements that can be drawn together to underpin a national agroecology strategy and programme. Importantly, a national re-engagement can be facilitated by linking and learning from various local level initiatives where stakeholders can more easily engage in actions targeted at their common challenges. Districts and municipalities can play a major role by supporting synergies between sustainable and local development.

South Africa's food system paradox

There is a paradox in the South African food system (FAO CIRAD CoE-FS, 2022): the nation is the most industrialised and the main finance hub in Africa, and belongs to the upper-middle income bracket. As the fifth most populated nation on the continent with 60 million residents, South Africa has a positive food balance supported by food, nutrition, and agricultural policies and research, as well as numerous agri-food programmes.

Yet, the outcomes of the food system are alarming. Colonial and apartheid-era injustices continue to influence the food system. The post-apartheid reintegration into the world food economy, liberalisation measures, and the neoliberal agenda adopted by the government has led to:

- Deterioration of an already fragile natural environment, made worse by the early adoption of conventional agriculture techniques and, more recently, by climate change
- Persistence of food and nutrition insecurity (with undernutrition, overweight and related non-communicable diseases) despite the availability of sufficient food and public health initiatives
- Imbalances across districts and provinces as well as in power, efficiency and information throughout food value chains and areas of governance
- The continuation of extreme wealth and income inequality resulting from multidimensional poverty and unemployment created by prior racial policies with continuing processes of exclusion.

The dominance of large-scale agriculture focused on productivity, competitiveness and output closely related to agri-food businesses has resulted in a powerful agrochemical complex, influential in government spheres. This conventional agriculture, rooted in the Green Revolution paradigm, is based on high external input and capital-intensive production, including synthetic fertiliser, toxic pesticides, hybrid and genetically modified (GM) seeds, with an emphasis on standardisation, economies of scale, and global commodity trade, with yields as the primary indicator of success.

Agricultural policies tend towards a commercial value chain approach to smallholder farmer support, including attempts at integration through contractualisation. The trade regime, seed and agrochemical laws pose significant obstacles to agroecological transition.

Nevertheless, large-scale conventional agriculture faces significant environmental limits impacting on profit, especially around soil fertility, excessive water use, biodiversity loss, and pesticide resistance. In response, segments of commercial agriculture especially in the grain sector, have increasingly adopted CA and CSA within an adaptive, incremental framework to deal with these threats. These focus on three core practices: no-till or minimum till, permanent ground cover, and crop rotation (most commonly maize and soya). They offer some benefits for environmental sustainability, reducing production risks, and the ability to achieve the same or greater productivity with reduced industrial inputs. However, these are limited to incremental efficiency adaptations while retaining the core of conventional agriculture.



Agroecology as an alternative

Agroecology approaches can help to transform the system and avoid a stalemate. Agroecology integrates three core concerns: environmental sustainability, social justice and redress, and economic fairness and participation. The High-Level Panel of Experts on Food and Nutrition (HLPE) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) has consolidated 13 principles which effectively incorporate these concerns.

The principles are recycling, input reduction, soil health, animal health, biodiversity, synergy, economic diversification, co-creation of knowledge, social values and diets, fairness, connectivity, land and natural resource governance, and participation. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), CGIAR and many other institutions from the global to local level have embraced agroecology as imperative to transition to more sustainable agro-food systems. With appropriate support, agroecological approaches can encompass practices and ecological and socially just transitions across the spectrum of producers from homesteads to large-scale commercial farms and across the agro-food system more broadly.

Agroecology as a set of principles and practices has rapidly expanded globally in the past decade but remains marginalised in South Africa. Despite this, important practical initiatives, particularly those led by civil society, have emerged to advance an agroecological agenda. An example of this is Participatory Guarantee Systems South Africa (PGS-SA), which is seeding PGS groups and networks around the country. PGS promotes localised, farmer-driven food systems with transparent quality assurance rooted in communities of practice. There are many other examples, ranging from individual farms to catchment-level partnerships. Pockets within government at multiple levels are also open to supporting this agenda. Within the policy mix, there are relatively consistent voices on environment and climate, with a more muted voice in favour of ecologically sound, mass-based and socially just transformation.

The South African policy landscape

More than 50 national strategies, plans and programmes touching on different aspects of agro-food systems have been produced since 1992. Many of them have elements that could be consolidated to underpin an agroecology strategy for South Africa. Significant convergence exists in agricultural and environmental policies, especially around climate change, biodiversity, and natural resource management (NRM) that orient towards more ecologically sustainable production practices.

First, two overarching policies exist, the Organic Policy 2010 and the Agroecology Strategy 2013 – but they remain as drafts. Then, producer support and food and nutrition security programmes, notably the 2017 National Food and Nutrition Security Plan and the 2019 draft National Policy on Comprehensive Producer Development Support, are multi-dimensional and offer potential for support for agroecological practices. Moreover, climate change policies and plans, municipal resilience strategies which exist for major metros, the CA and CSA draft frameworks, and NRM, biodiversity, land

reform and spatial planning policies and plans all offer openings for ecologically sustainable agricultural and food practices.

However, most of these policies and plans are only selectively implemented at best, revealing internal tensions between the dominant neoliberal agenda and reformist or more progressive agendas. A key reason for this is a lack of a united progressive constituency lobbying for such changes. On the basis of strong research and lobbying, some parts of commercial agriculture have proven successful in positioning CA and CSA at the fore as the government framework for sustainability transitions in agriculture, from the 2011 National Development Plan on down. This is in contrast with efforts to formulate organic and agroecology policies which were not effectively supported within government to reach fruition because of weak and fragmented coalitions for change.

The lack of a unified constituency driving progressive change reflects the general state of civil society, that is preoccupied with supporting people in their lived experience. There is a diversified social movement landscape that includes supporters of food sovereignty, organic production, and agroecology. The connection of this cluster with consumers and the wider public is limited, which prevents leverage for political pressure. More broadly, food and nutrition issues are still not a significant part of the discourse of political parties and are mostly present at the grassroots level through civil society organisations.

Strategic opportunities for agroecological development

A number of strategic opportunities for agroecological transitions exist including efforts to revive work on the existing national agroecology strategy. A national agroecology programme is key to promoting agroecological practices across the production spectrum and agro-food systems. The draft National Agroecology Strategy, dormant since 2013, could be revitalised if progressive civil society organisations, potentially including the trade union movement, present a common front, and identify the appropriate entry points in government to revive these discussions. These entry points include aligning agroecology with climate change, NRM and biodiversity, and with job creation related to the adoption of new agricultural practices.

At the local scale, opportunities exist to operationalise work on agroecological transitions through place-based initiatives in specific locations, identified and developed together with local actors on the basis of already-existing initiatives.

These local experiences are critical for identifying policy obstacles, opportunities and to draw lessons about pathways adapted to specific contexts. Such place-based approaches can be powerful because they can facilitate shared perceptions of the challenges and develop a common vision for the future.

Engagement with local and district municipalities is a key entry point to government, including on food and health regulations, land access, local economic development, and coordination of climate change adaptation efforts. Such processes can help develop an evidence base for agroecology through detailed scientific and social studies on existing initiatives. They can also build agroecological practices and develop communities of practice, which can facilitate the consolidation of a national approach to agroecology.

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TAFS is a multi-country project launched in 2020 supported by CIRAD and five research partnership platforms in three continents. It collaborates with the Transformative Partnership Platform on agroecology (TPP), initiated by France and the CGIAR, where it contributes to the policy component. The project is implemented in nine countries: Burkina Faso, Mali, Madagascar and South Africa; Laos and Vietnam; Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia. In South Africa, TAFS' partner is the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS).