

POLICY BRIEF

Towards Local, Democratic, Agroecological Food Systems

*Prepared by:
Claire Rousell and Brittany Kesselman for Gender CC,
with additions by Farai Mtero for AFRA*



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
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Introduction

This briefing draws on a combination of interviews and participatory mapping events in Walkerville, Orange Farm and the West Rand regions of Gauteng and uMgungundlovu District in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) between August and November 2020. It highlights findings and recommendations from a short-term project to source fresh produce from smallholder farmers for food relief efforts in these areas as part of the emergency response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown.

The project was implemented by GenderCC Southern Africa in Gauteng and the Land Network National Engagement Strategy of South Africa (LandNNES) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) from May to November 2020, with support from Heinrich-Boll Stiftung (HBF) Southern Africa.

The policy brief provides an overview of the current South African food system, including the impacts of Covid-19, insights from project work on the ground, and actionable policy recommendations for diversifying and promoting greater agency in the food system.

*Photograph: Bonkolo community project, Orange Farm.
Photography by Brittany Kesselman.*





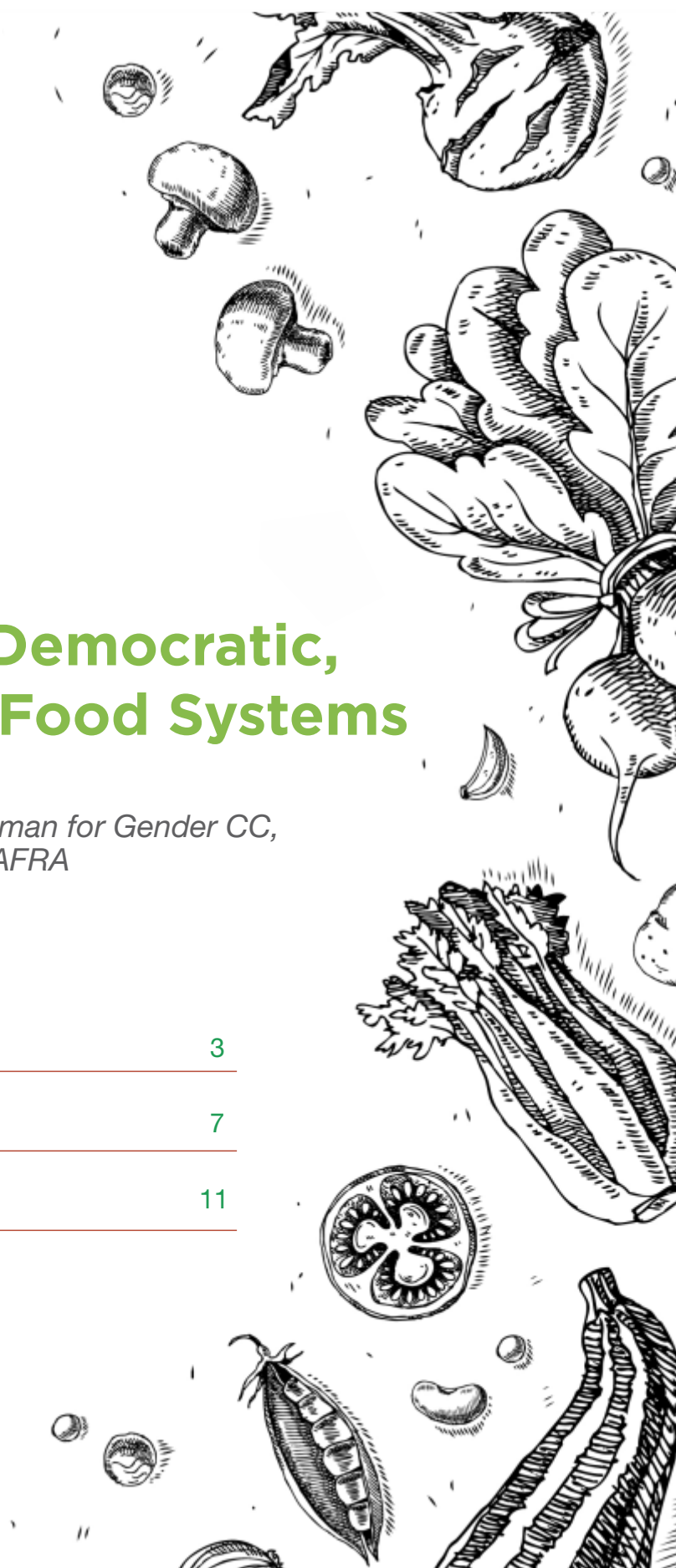
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Background



The project and associated research included 26 farmers in Gauteng and 78 farmers in KZN, with women as the majority. Women tend to play a prominent role in smallholder agriculture mostly because they are primarily responsible for household food provisioning.

Participants are predominantly small-scale farmers operating as private enterprises or co-operatives on land sizes ranging between 0.5 and 94 ha. They are producing a wide range of vegetables and, in some cases, fruit, nuts or other products. Some are also poultry and livestock farmers. In addition, some are engaged in agro-processing activities such as the making of preserves, drying or cutting up and packaging vegetables.

The majority of participants in Gauteng considered their farming activities to be organic, although none had third-party certification. In both Gauteng and KZN, a significant number of producers were making their own natural inputs, such as compost and natural pest control remedies. A smaller proportion purchase inputs from a variety of small suppliers, commercial shops and national co-op chains. Around one quarter of the KZN producers were using synthetic fertilisers or pesticides.

In Gauteng almost all producers are part of farmer networks, mostly informal, which help them source inputs such as manure and mulch. These networks also engage in seed swapping and sharing of tools and vehicles. In some cases they also group together to supply larger or more diverse orders.



Photograph: 2020 UCL Mnini Mildred Myeza. Photography by Catherine Hornby



Markets

In both Gauteng and KZN, the predominant markets for nearly all producers were sales within the immediate community, including walk-in purchases and sales to local hawkers. In KZN, a sizeable proportion (48%) also sold to bakkie traders, who travel some 90 to 130 kms from eThekweni metro to procure produce from farmers in uMgungundlovu. In Gauteng close to 40% of respondents sold directly to greengrocers and restaurants/caterers, while in KZN a quarter of producers sold to supermarkets. In Gauteng about a quarter of respondents sold to the Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market (FPM), but in KZN less than 10% sold to the FPM.

The relatively small proportion of farmers selling to schools (less than 10%) in uMgungundlovu suggests that government's Radical Agrarian Socio-Economic Transformation Programme (RASET), which is supposed to procure 20% of school food programme

requirements from smallholders, could still expand further. Other public procurement channels did not feature at all. In Gauteng a few notable developments included an organised box scheme, sales to organic aggregators and local organic markets/retailers. Sales to organised community groups such as churches and creches are also an important outlet and could suggest a viable model for consistent and committed support from collectives who are nearby and relatively easy to access where transport is a limitation.

Other studies have confirmed the importance of informal marketing systems for smallholder producers in South Africa. Essentially, informal markets are “loosely organised value chains that are poorly documented and largely ignored by policy makers”¹. This brief profile suggests that smallholders play a key role in the food system through supplying bakkie traders, street hawkers and spaza shops, and that particularly during the Covid-19 lockdown were vitally important to shoring up food security at community level.

¹ Cousins, B. 2015. “Land reform is sinking in South Africa: can it be saved?” Land, Law and Leadership. Nelson Mandela Foundation., p.8



*Photograph: Relief parcel delivery,
You Reap What You Sow cooperative 2020.
Photography by Brittany Kesselman.*



Covid

Covid-19 and the government lock-down regulations affected producers in different ways. For the majority, it meant the loss of markets, having to accept lower prices for their harvest, and in some cases loss of access to their gardens due to obligatory social distancing measures. For around a third of the Gauteng participants it meant an increase in sales in local communities and some were able to sell produce as part of relief efforts organised by civil society groups. For some it meant the emergence of new sales models, such as box schemes. Many producers also made donations in their communities. Some were beneficiaries of government's Covid relief vouchers, although in some cases there were challenges in accessing these.

Support

A relatively small number of participants in Gauteng had in the past received government and/or NGO support, a few received corporate support, while most received no support whatsoever. Around half have a relationship with extension officers although most have found this unhelpful as they are producing agroecologically and extension officers have no knowledge of this nor means to support farmers. Some producers received infrastructure such as tunnels and fencing. A very small number of the participants had access to trucks and tractors from government, but still with challenges in accessing and making effective use of them. Some producers received training from various government departments, and some received inputs such as compost, seed and seedlings.



Challenges

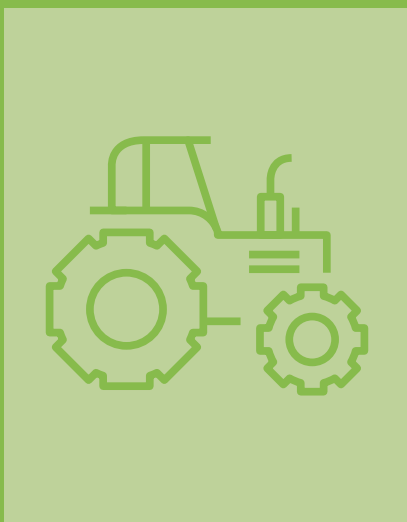
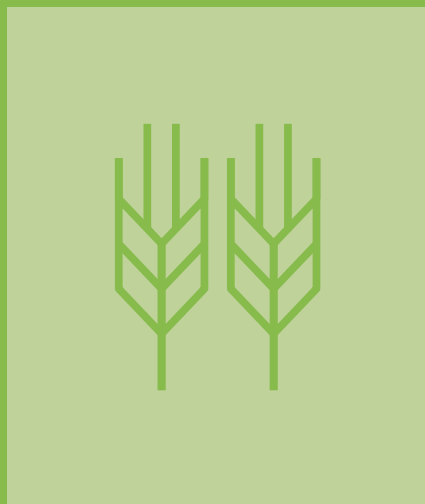
One of the key issues facing Gauteng participants is around **access to land and secure tenure**. Only two of the farmers interviewed owned the land on which they work. Some have short- or long-term agreements with the landowners, but very few had the legal documentation to prove this. This inhibits them from accessing particular kinds of government support and applying for loans and prevents them from making long term plans.

Access to water is a key issue for many of the farmers. In Gauteng, the majority had water from boreholes or used municipal water and a few have rainwater tanks. However, erratic access to electricity to run the borehole and pumps, and broken equipment, hampered their efforts. Although some have sprinklers and/or irrigation systems, the majority of participants were watering by hand with either a hose or a watering can/bucket. Many of the participants indicated that if they had the financial resources, they would invest in boreholes, irrigation and rainwater collection tanks. In KZN, 49% of responding farmers had some form

of irrigation, with 29% of KZN respondents drawing water from a borehole and one-fifth getting water from a municipal supply. Municipal water generally is costly and at times subject to water cuts.

About a quarter of Gauteng respondents were growing with tunnels, but the majority do not have the means to set up such **infrastructure**. Those with tunnels are able to grow all year round and are more protected from frost and hail, two major factors affecting crop success in the region. Affordability and access to **tools** is a concern. There are some networks that share tools but there was also reluctance to share tools due to theft (discussed below).

A very small minority of the farmers have access to a tractor and other **machinery**, often shared. This is not without complications. In some cases, government infrastructure has been purchased but is managed in such a way that it means that farmers cannot easily access it, if at all. In another instance a communally owned tractor, that members of the community contribute to, stands idle because it is broken. Hiring a tractor privately is quite expensive and often out of the financial reach of the farmers.





Theft is an issue that was raised by some of the farmers who participated in the study. They had lost or were aware of members of their networks who had lost pumps, tools, pipes and produce.

One of the most pressing issues facing the farmers were the obstacles to accessing stable **markets** and **fair pricing**.

Small-scale farmers reported experiencing challenges accessing the Johannesburg FPM. They are not offered fair prices for their produce and frequently make a loss when selling there. Their value as small scale, agroecological farmers is not recognised and they are forced to compete with some of the largest producers in the country, who can afford to sell at low unit prices due to the huge quantities they produce.

At the JFPM, organic produce is rarely differentiated from conventionally grown produce and farmers do not experience a price premium for growing without chemical pesticides and fertilisers. Although there are niche markets that do value organic and agroecologically grown produce for its environmental and health benefits, these markets are often inaccessible to farmers due to geographical distance, as well as the inaccessibility of the networks that manage these markets. An exception to this is the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) but only a very small number of farmers are active in such networks at this stage.

Many producers shared transport with other members of their networks or relied on aggregators to transport their produce to market, while less than half had their own vehicles. Selling to community members or hawkers was a preferred option for many farmers as it does not require transport and they are able to secure fair prices.

The cost of **labour** to assist and/or run the farm is another major issue for small scale farmers interviewed. These costs are constant even if the crop fails or does not fetch an adequate price.

The Gauteng region, particularly the South and West where this study focused, is known for frost, flooding and hail which are high risk factors for crop failure. The farmers interviewed did not, in most cases, have the capital to purchase protective materials against these conditions.



There is evidence to suggest that some of the ways that **climate change** expresses itself in this region are in the form of fewer rainfall events but each event delivering a much larger quantity of rain than in the past, as well as more extreme temperature fluctuations. Without adequate resources and systemic support, small scale farmers could bear the brunt of increased irregularities in climatic conditions as we head into an increasingly unstable climate future, despite smaller farms and agroecological practices being better adapted to climactic fluctuations than large scale monoculture farming.

Many farmers experience considerable challenges in accessing loans and/or funding without secure land tenure. **Financial support** is needed for infrastructure and running costs while they establish themselves as self-sustaining businesses.

Farmers expressed the need for further **training** for themselves and for their employees, particularly in the areas of administrative and management skills, and agroecological practices (seed saving, compost making, worm farming and natural methods of pest control). There is definitely an appetite for training and knowledge-sharing events and the community building that can come along with structured time shared with members of local networks.



Photograph: Sibongile Cele, PGS training, Orange Farm.
Photography by Brittany Kesselman.



Photograph: John Nzira, seed saving training, Toekomsrus.
Photography by Brittany Kesselman.



Recommendations



Photograph: Vegetable distribution, Orange Farm 2020. Photography by Bongani Maphoto.

Municipal Government

Production

- Facilitate access to unused government land with some kind of tenure security.
- Improve access to existing government-owned agriculture machinery (e.g. tractors) and infrastructure (e.g. agri-hubs).
- When providing inputs, include the option of agroecological inputs (e.g. non-GM and non-hybrid seed, seedlings, compost, biopesticides, etc). This may require building capacity to produce these inputs.

Markets

- Provide municipal infrastructure for local farmers' markets at locations such as transport hubs.
- Enhance access to and functioning of agri-hubs for aggregation and processing by small scale farmers.
- Decentralise fresh produce markets with local satellites servicing East Rand, West Rand, etc.
- Prioritise procurement from small scale agroecological farmers for government canteens, functions and events.



Provincial Government

Production

- Facilitate access to unused land at schools and clinics with some kind of tenure security, and support producers on such land to supply the schools and clinics with food.
- Improve consistency of extension services and access to inputs. Ensure that extension officers have knowledge of agroecology and are able to offer worthwhile support to farmers who work in this way and can provide agroecological inputs.
- Improve efficiency of infrastructure support – currently the waiting time on some items (e.g. boreholes and water infrastructure) is up to five years.

Markets

- Enhance access to and functioning of agri-hubs for aggregation and processing by small scale farmers.
- Prioritise procurement from small scale agroecological farmers for schools, correctional services, health services and government canteens, functions and events.

National Government

Production

- Accelerate land reform and focus on redistributing land to small-scale agroecological farmers rather than large monoculture farms that replicate current industrial agricultural policies.
- Include formal recognition of PGS as part of the organic policy.
- Facilitate relevant agroecological training to small scale farmers.
- Support the ongoing process and endorse the outcome of the formalisation of an agroecological qualification. Support agroecological training for extension officers and provide bursaries for large scale roll out of agroecological qualifications.
- Consider making financing more accessible and affordable to small-scale agroecological producers (e.g. by expanding the mandate of the Land Bank, offering guarantees, etc.).

Markets

- Prioritise procurement from small scale agroecological farmers for schools, correctional services, health services and government canteens, functions and events.



Photograph: John Nzira, seed training 2020. Photography by Claire Rousell.





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