

On community, soil and agency: cultivating sustainable food systems

The big and the small – drivers of (un)sustainability

As with all sustainability challenges, the problem of achieving socially just and ecologically sustainable food systems has no simple answers. So, this article will not attempt to provide any. Instead, it seeks to unpack what makes our existing paradigm unsustainable, explore emerging alternatives in the regenerative farming movement, and cultivate new imaginaries to expand the realm of the possible.

To orient ourselves in this exploration, let us consider the following question. Given the realities of climate change and ecological overshoot, how do we cultivate a new mode of development to achieve net-zero, sustainable coexistence of people and planet?

One response to this question manifests in the post-growth economic paradigm. Supporters of this paradigm suggest that to achieve long-term sustainability, we need to move away from viewing development within the narrow confines of GDP¹, economic growth and even monetary wealth, towards a nuanced vision of human wellbeing and its diverse drivers. This can be facilitated by understanding mechanisms of empowerment as the ability to access and utilise resources. To quote the rapper, educator and activist Akala, “Money is a means to get wealth – not the wealth itself”. If we want to create a socially just and ecologically sustainable world, it is not enough to critique how systems of power maintain injustice, or to reform fundamentally unjust and destructive systems – although these are important. We also need to actively cultivate transitions to more sustainable alternatives.

A crucial element for such transitions is a nuanced approach to land reform and use that actively balances the needs of human development and ecological sustainability. To achieve equitable access to resources and opportunities required for holistic wellbeing, without overshooting planetary boundaries – to ensure everyone has enough, while conserving and restoring our ecosystems – our global systems of organising the economy need to be transformed at a fundamental level.

And yet, all of this begins at a much smaller scale. The economy is an emergent outcome of many individual actions that (re)organise patterns of interaction between people, ecosystems, resources and institutions. Our agency, in turn, is not confined to the level of the individual, but emerges through contextually specific capacities to harness resources, and influence interactions through our networks and relationships, to achieve collectively agreed-upon outcomes.

¹ <https://beyond-gdp.world/beyond-gdp-basics/what-is-wrong-with-gdp>



Food security challenge in South Africa

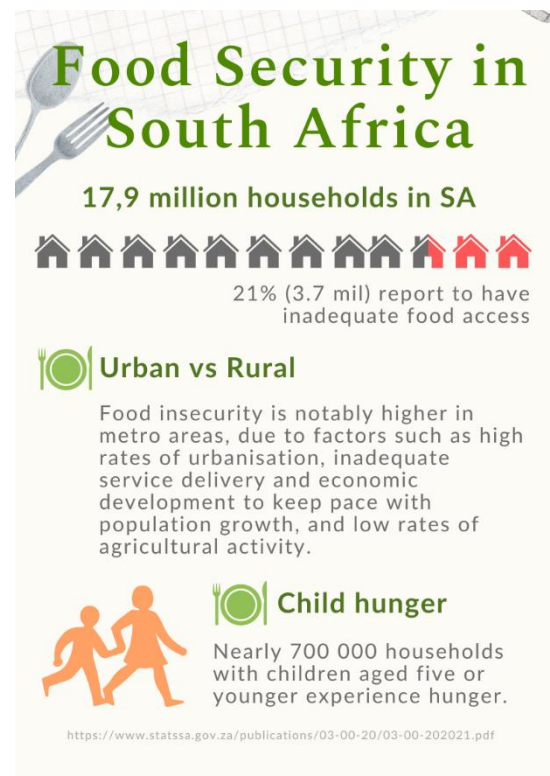
This is an important dynamic to keep in mind when exploring a problem with the scale of food security. According to Statistics South Africa², globally, 828 million people experienced hunger in 2021, largely concentrated in the Global South – 425 million in Asia, and 278 million in Africa. 21% of South African households (3,7 million of 17,9 million) reported inadequate food access during this period. Given South Africa's apartheid history, the racial demographics are unsurprising: 2,5% of White and Indian/Asian households reported inadequate food access, compared to 18,7% of Coloured households and 23,6% of Black households. Food insecurity is also notably higher in metro areas, due to factors such as high rates of urbanisation, inadequate service delivery and economic development to keep pace with population growth, and low rates of agricultural activity.

Of particular concern is that nearly 700 000 households with children aged five or younger experienced hunger. Inadequate food and nutrition during early childhood development is associated with low immunity, weak learning, impaired growth and brain development, and a host of other problems.³ It is an uncomfortable truth that childhood malnutrition has irreversible long-term consequences, limiting the efficacy of later interventions and rendering equitable opportunity impossible.

A socially and ecologically just food system, therefore, must be at the heart of sustainable development – and indeed, is enshrined in Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals: ending hunger, achieving food security, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture.⁴

Living Soils – a holistic initiative for sustainable agriculture and food security

Living Soils Community Learning Farm is a regenerative farming project based in Lynedoch, Stellenbosch. It was launched in 2019 as a joint initiative of Woolworths, Spier and the Sustainability Institute, and aims to tackle food security through multiple distinct but interrelated strategies. Firstly, it is a functioning regenerative farm, and its produce contributes directly to food security through a balance of sales to households that can afford the retail price (22%), subsidies to at-risk households and childhood feeding schemes (51%), and donations to at-risk households (22%).

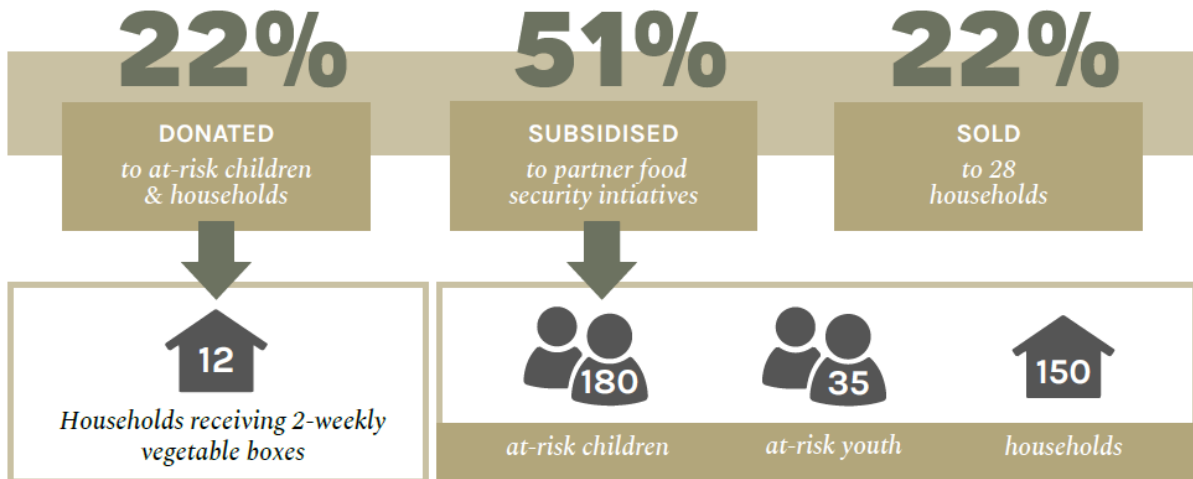


² <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/03-00-20/03-00-202021.pdf>

³ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/poor-diets-damaging-childrens-health-worldwide-warns-unicef>

⁴ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

DIRECT FOOD SECURITY CONTRIBUTIONS



All produce was reported to be culturally relevant to the meals created

Living Soils 2022 Food security contribution

Secondly, it runs an internship program which provides above-minimum-wage employment along with vital practical training and work experience to young farmers. This tackles unemployment (a leading cause of food insecurity) and provides vital practical skills to enter and help transform South Africa's agricultural systems and food value chain. Women farmers are centred in this approach, in line with gender equality ambitions and the understanding that impacts of empowerment are more effectively spread through women's empowerment.

Thirdly, the experimentation and knowledge generation that occurs on the farm, through both staff and interns, contributes to developing new narratives about food security, healthy nutrition and farming practices that are synergistic for communities and ecosystems.

"The type of farming practiced at Living Soils is the type of farming that should be introduced to the community. I am passionate about being an Agricultural Extensionist and I am interested in teaching people about regenerative farming. I would like to use the skills and the knowledge I've gained at Living Soils, for example teaching young and growing farmers how to make worm compost from scratch instead of purchasing it." - Namhla Rasha, current Student Intern



A systems lens is helpful for understanding the cumulative impacts and complementary relationships that emerge between these different food security strategies. They can be viewed as different processes that influence social and agricultural systems at different speeds and scales. For example, direct food contributions and employment occur only at a small scale, but are felt immediately and have a major impact on the beneficiaries' food security and quality of life. The impacts of its training and skills development occurs more slowly, manifesting as past interns gain employment and their skills and knowledge diffuse into the organisations and communities that they work with, contributing to localised food system transitions that enhance food security. Finally, the new narratives it produces occur most slowly, but can be transformational at a societal scale as they start to influence policy, mainstream farming practices and large-scale social behaviours.

“In addition to the internship, I make sure I gain more knowledge by participating in conferences, and seminars, I continuously enhance my knowledge and exchange ideas with like-minded individuals, ultimately contributing to a larger collective effort in addressing food security challenges.” Mapitsi Sedutla, former Student Intern

Impact from the ground up

Synergies emerge through the reinforcing relationships among these strategies and their outcomes.



As interns enter employment and informally pass on what they've learnt, they contribute to building knowledge and skills on sustainable farming practices that become enacted within local communities, for example through NGOs and word-of-mouth, and to individual commercial projects.

When these practices are successful, the results will be communicated, which contributes to changing practices at progressively larger commercial scales and can inform mainstreaming regenerative practices into government policy.

Momentum at a national scale will contribute to increasing support for local initiatives - providing immediate benefits of employment and food security, and aiding development of a healthy population through access to nutritious food, dietary knowledge, and regenerative farming skills.

Regenerative farming practices will progressively help to restore soil health and biodiversity, enhancing ecosystem resilience and contributing to better conditions for farming and more healthy, affordable and accessible produce.

Over time, these synergistic processes could come together into a virtuous circle that supports food security at a national scale.

Small is beautiful – Living Soils internships and relational agency

“I have learned that in order for you to grow healthy and strong you'll need to eat natural food that is produced out of the ground without any chemicals applied to it ... I share my knowledge with my family and friends, especially the ones who have gardens and the ones who are interested in starting their own gardens in my community.” Zainudeen Africa, former Youth In Transition Intern



Focusing in on the Young Farmers Internship, a strongly relational understanding of agency emerges within the holistic learning approach. Alongside practical regenerative farming techniques, students develop ‘soft skills’ such as communication and leadership, in addition to getting exposure to the broader food value chain. The interns are empowered by integrating them into supporting networks, including opportunities for employment, collaboration and further skills development. The learning programme also adapts to each new intake of interns, drawing on their individual insights and experiences to shape the curriculum in a participatory manner, ensuring it is relevant to the arcs of their journeys. This sets interns up to succeed in their careers and nurtures their ability to enact food system change agency via the capacities that they can harness through their networks.

“Through the knowledge and skills I have gained at Living Soils, I feel more empowered to make a positive difference in the world. I now have a foundation in regenerative farming techniques and sustainable agricultural practices, which I can apply not only in my personal life but also share with others. I am confident in my ability to educate and inspire those around me, whether it's by engaging in conversations with family and friends about the importance of sustainable food choices or by actively promoting sustainable farming practices.” Mapitsi Sedutla

From the everyday practicalities of adapting farming methods to local ecologies and conditions, to hiking trips that provide an opportunity to form deeper relationships with one another and nature, the philosophy of Living Soils is lived out via the socially and ecologically regenerative contexts students are embedded within. This experience

manifests in new ways of thinking about the entangled agencies of human and non-human, living and non-living.

“The experience has broadened my understanding of the interconnectedness between soil health, sustainable agriculture, and human well-being. Witnessing the remarkable impact of sustainable farming practices on soil fertility and crop quality has made me realize the vital role that healthy soils play in producing nutritious food.” Mapitsi Sedutla

Seemingly disparate entities, several of which tend to be viewed as passive recipients of human desires and agency, emerge as co-creating partners within complex, evolving networks of relationships. The soil, earthworms, farmers, partners, vegetables and recipients of produce, to borrow a phrase from Anna Tsing, “make each other’s world-making projects possible.”

“[Regenerative farming has] made me value the benefits that we get from the environment. For example, to keep the soil good for both the crops and the living organisms that are also beneficial for the crops we grow as farmers.” Namhla Rasha

Towards just and regenerative farming futures

Two final elements of the Living Soils initiative deserve a mention. Firstly, a community workshop programme aims to develop regenerative farming knowledge and skills within the Lynedoch community, at-risk households and teachers. Getting community involvement has proved challenging, in large part because of the exploitative history of apartheid farming relationships. Narratives about farming are entangled with this history, and so there is a widely felt stigma associated with being a farmer. However, a significant outcome was the election of two ‘food champions’, a key concept for the initiative. The food champions, as trusted pillars within their communities, are responsible for spreading knowledge about regenerative farming. Secondly, a Community Supported Agriculture model is being considered that would enable customers and communities to have a direct say in what the farm produces.

These two initiatives, in concert, provide insights into the emerging possibilities of Living Soils and the regenerative farming movement more broadly. By reconnecting communities to farming practices that work with the land and complement local diets, the character and dynamics of regenerative farming may result in a more diverse, democratic, culturally responsive and resilient food system.

As the network grows larger and denser with greater community, commercial and social enterprise participation, regenerative farming innovations can be circulated more quickly through ripple effects and virtuous circles, leading to accelerated, self-sustaining transformation. This represents a microcosm of wider transitions towards sustainability and the agencies that cocreate these transitions.

From farm to plate, sustainable outcomes are driven by the quality of relationships within the food system. In the end, the holistic nutritional value of the food embodies the lively, collaborative social and ecological relationships that produced it.

Written by Francis Thorold, a freelance writer, systems thinker and PGDip Sustainable Development student. For more information about the Sustainability Institute and Living Soils, please visit <https://www.sustainabilityinstitute.net/research-learning/collaborative-projects/living-soils-community-learning-farm/>