
Ecological Justice, Climate Shocks and the Challenge of Re-Agrarianising South Africa through the Food Sovereignty Commons

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Introduction

South Africa's globalised food system is based on a history of violence, dispossession and accumulation through ecocide (the mass-scale destruction of human and non-human nature), which has been devastating for the natural commons (land, water, biodiversity, creative labour, energy and the earth system).¹ Land redistribution, which is essential, cannot be separated from how the natural commons have been abused, polluted and damaged by a mono-industrial agrarian structure and the implications this has for socio-ecological relations. After the first democratic elections, the African National Congress made commitments to redistribute 30 per cent of land, but instead it globalised the food system, further concentrating the agrarian structure. Deracialising agrarian capitalism, as part of a deep globalisation class project, has not been transformative. In this context, the land question has become increasingly polarising in South Africa. Land justice is crucial for South Africa, but expropriation without compensation, even through a new law to create a new class of monopoly black capitalist farmers locked into a globalised and ecocidal agrarian structure, reduces redistributive justice to a farce, is not transformative and perpetuates inequality.

Moreover, in the context of the worsening climate crisis, South Africa's redistributive land discourse must be rethought. This chapter argues the land question in South Africa has to be located in the context of the emergence of climate famines and the risk of more intensive climate shocks (extreme droughts, floods and heatwaves, for instance). Agrarian thought and redistributive land justice must be shaped by climate justice

¹ The chapter is derived from a larger research project on climate famines.

and vice versa. Given the systemic risk posed by the worsening climate crisis, we have to ask what the most appropriate food system is, as part of a deep and just transition, to ensure we meet the needs of all in the country. How do we ensure that the right to food and water, ecological justice and ethics of care inform the making of such a food system? Ecological justice in this chapter is conceived to include climate, land and social justice; it straddles social and natural relations by recognising the intrinsic worth of human and non-human life forms. In this regard, ecological justice stands for the defence of the natural commons (land, water, biodiversity, creative labour, energy and the earth system) as the basis for the reproduction of life.

In the post-apartheid period, land redistribution policy discourse has been about either a state- or market-centric approach. A third approach, centring the commons in local spaces and on a macro-scale, and based on building a food sovereignty commons system through a politics of democratic systemic reforms, central to climate justice politics, is a crucial alternative to be considered. Such a bottom-up transformative approach to the land question has been pioneered by food sovereignty campaigning in South Africa across variegated interstitial spaces, both urban and rural. This approach is based on a conception of claiming the constitutional right to food and water, championing ecological justice, and practising non-anthropocentric ethics of care. To appreciate the ecological justice underpinnings of this perspective, this chapter delves into four crucial aspects of food sovereignty thinking in South Africa.² First is the critique of globalised agrarian capital's ecologies and its connection to the larger general crisis of socio-ecological reproduction. Second, the place of the commons in understanding the making of South African capitalism and historiography is examined in order to learn critical lessons from this past for food sovereignty commons system building and ecological justice. This is also a decolonial imperative. Third, the ecocidal logic of South Africa's globalised industrial agricultural food system is laid bare by highlighting its role in constituting several dangerous ecological rifts. Finally, the chapter returns to the challenge of re-agrarianising South Africa through food sovereignty, with an emphasis on its normative, systemic and agential practices.

² In this regard I draw on various intellectual resources developed by the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (2015 to the present).

Globalised Food Systems, Systemic Shocks and the General Crisis of Socio-ecological Reproduction

The ecologies of globalised, carbon-based, mono-industrial agricultural food systems go to the heart of the contemporary and general crisis of socio-ecological production in the world. The agricultural sector is one of the most exposed and vulnerable in terms of climate shocks such as droughts, floods, cyclones, heat waves and wildfires. Transboundary agricultural trade is revealing major risks. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the globalised food system displayed acute stresses in terms of problems with supply lines, logistics and changing food habits. Food prices have also been edging upwards. However, in 2021 to early 2022, globalised food markets were reeling from a multi-dimensional shock (Hodgson & Bernard, 2022). In 2021, Brazil experienced severe frosts in its coffee belt, sending prices to a seven-year high, while heat waves and drought in Canada hit pea production hard, more than doubling the prices of plant-based meat alternatives. The prices of Belgian potatoes surged after flooding devastated large swaths of Europe during the continent's summer. In the United States, oat production was its lowest since 1866 due to heat and dry weather sapping the yield potential in major growing states (Hirtzer & Carey, 2021). In this context, the Stockholm Environment Institute issued a report which stated climate change would: 'dramatically impact agricultural production all around the globe' (Adams et al., 2021). The report goes on to caution that with warmer temperatures, the 'risks are greater than the opportunities'. From its risk assessment, it highlights maize and rice, important staples, as facing a major risk. The Russian invasion of Ukraine compounded the famine conditions in Africa, pushing up food prices, including staples and input costs (Kroll, 2022). Africa imports about 40 per cent of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine. In this context, many United Nations (UN) and food aid organisations have publicly asserted that Africa is set to face increasing hunger due to worsening climate conditions (RFI, 2022).

However, the 2021–2022 multi-dimensional shock on the globalised food system fits into a pattern that has occurred repeatedly over the past two decades. As food systems have been restructured, financialised and externalised to integrate with global circuits, severe vulnerabilities have been revealed as various shocks have hit. For instance, in 2006–2008, 2009–2011, 2014–2016 and 2018, shocks have impacted the globalised food system (Satgar & Cherry, 2019). In each of these moments, multiple

causal factors have been identified, ranging from climate impacts, biofuel production, the geopolitics of oil price increases to financial speculation, amongst others. In 2018 it was the price of crude oil, which spiked at US\$80 a barrel with ramifications throughout the global economy, including the food system (Vaughan, 2018). The 2014–2016 shock was regionalised and impacted Southern Africa dramatically, with almost 40 million in food stress due to an El Niño-induced drought. This was the first major climate shock in the region after a 1°C increase overshoot on a planetary scale in 2015. The second shock (2009–2011) fed into the revolutions of the ‘Arab Spring’, with calls for ‘bread, freedom and justice’ reverberating through the streets. The first shock (2006–2008) led to food riots in various countries.

Besides the fragilities of a deeply globalised food system, the carbon emissions of this system paradoxically create their own climate shock feedbacks. As a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, such a globalised food system generates its own systemic risk and is locked into a ‘climate crisis trap’. It is the second largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in the world. Some estimates suggest that the global food regime contributes 20–30 per cent of all human-associated greenhouse gas emissions (Garnett et al., 2016). While emissions from agriculture and associated land-use change account for 24 per cent of human-made emissions (IPCC, 2014), 14.5–19 per cent of this comes from livestock alone (Herero, 2016; Reisinger & Clark, 2018). Packaging, retail, transport, processing, food preparation and waste disposal contribute an additional 5–10 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions (Garnett et al., 2016).

In this context, world hunger is on the rise. Current UN estimates suggest 811 million people in the world are food deprived. As a concept, famine refers to food deprivation followed by hunger and mortality in a particular context, such as a community or parts of a country. Essentially, almost 1 billion human beings on our planet are facing famine despite the vaunted abundance of the corporate-controlled global food system. From 2015, when the world overshoot a 1°C increase in planetary temperature since prior to the industrial revolution, the risk of climate-induced famines increased. Several places on the planet, including Zimbabwe, Honduras, Madagascar, Ethiopia (particularly the Tigray region), Mozambique and Puerto Rico, have faced this challenge. Madagascar makes for a tragic example, with its globalised food system heavily reliant on the export of monocrops such as vanilla, cloves, fruits, cocoa, sugarcane, coffee, sisal and cotton. In mid-2021, a severe drought

in the southern part of the country placed an estimated 1 million people in famine conditions. On top of this, and more recently (late January and early February 2022), within two weeks of each other, cyclones Ana and Batsirai smashed into the island, washing away villages and exacerbating famine conditions (United Nations, 2022). In general, these situations have upended the conception of famine in the academic and humanitarian literature in three respects. First, climate extremes (cyclones, droughts, heatwaves, wildfires and floods) have impacted these countries sometimes in combination, within short periods of time, forcing their globalised and mono-industrialised food systems to collapse or climate extremes have been a serious contributory factor to socio-ecological collapse and conflict. Second, climate famines in the Global South, particularly Africa, are a direct result of the climate apartheid of the Global North, with its historical emissions and continued use of oil, coal and gas. Third, climate famines are one of many symptomatic expressions of the larger crisis of capitalist civilisation (circa 2007 to the present). This is the fourth general crisis of capitalism, and it brings to the foreground from within the deeper structural divides of capitalism – production/reproduction, nature/society, polity/economy – dangerous systemic crisis tendencies, including globalised food system collapse, worsening hunger and famines.³ The ecologies of globalised, carbon-based and mono-industrial agrarian capital are directly implicated in this crisis.

The Commons Mode of Production, Farming and the Making of Capitalist South Africa

The concept of the commons refers to (i) a commonwealth of life enabling socio-ecological systems; (ii) governed together by a community of commoners (iii) to ensure their lives are reproduced and that such systems thrive; as a mode of production, it seeks the general good through organising human labour and natural relations.⁴ In world history, the natural commons have been at the centre of the relationship between humans and nature for about 200,000 years. The oldest

³ Capitalism has been through three general crises (later nineteenth century, inter-war years – referred to as the Great Depression – and early 1970s). Methodologically, it is important to study each crisis on its own terms.

⁴ In this definition I move away from referring to the commons narrowly as instrumentalised resources. See De Angelis (2019: 124) for this kind of usage.

commons relationship is in Africa, the origins of our species, and it demonstrates a coeval relationship between humans and ecosystems. In this context, cooperation also marked social relations; humans were not *homo economicus* (the embodiment of a colonial and imperial conception of what it means to be human). Even with settlements, there were communal and marine tenure systems to ensure that socio-ecological relations thrived (Ricoverti, 2013). In Rome, a distinctive role was provided for *res communes* (or property held in common); in the 1300s in medieval Europe a Forest Charter was adopted to ensure co-governance; and, in general, custom played an important role in providing rules for the commons in Europe.⁵ Unlike Europe, in which there was a transition from feudalism to capitalism, South Africa followed a different historical sequence, from the commons mode of production to militarised mercantile slavery and then settler capitalism.⁶

What follows is not a history of farming in South Africa and its relationship to capitalism but rather a few critical views on how to rethink the history of South Africa, farming and the making of capitalism from the standpoint of the food sovereignty commons. The concept of the commons mode of production is used as a heuristic to engage in informed conjecture based on academic evidence (Lowy, 2005).⁷ At stake is how we overcome the last great dispossession of the natural commons so we can take commoning to a new level to sustain life. Moreover, revisiting the historical archive about the commons mode of production is crucial for how we decolonise South African history but also think about emancipatory ecologies in the present, in the context of advancing food sovereignty and ecological justice. Three crucial issues need to be foregrounded in this regard.

First, most of the historiography on South Africa provides cursory insights into hunter-gatherers (San), nomadic herders (Khoikhoi) and then, over the past 2,000 years, pastoralists and cultivators (Bantu) made

⁵ See Linebaugh (2008) for a history of the Magna Carta and the Forest Charter in the 1300s in Europe.

⁶ I use the commons mode of production to differentiate it from the 'lineage mode of production' utilised by Anthropologists and the 'peasant mode of production' gestured to in the work of Colin Bundy ([1979] 1988).

⁷ I utilise the commons mode of production to disrupt notions of social transitions from one social order to another as part of linear modern progress, including capitalist modernity, but in a specifically South African context. Walter Benjamin's thesis inspired this intervention, 'On the concept of history', which utilises the past (pre-capitalist cultural and historical references) to critique the present and find a way into the future.

an appearance as they moved into the southern part of the continent (see Feinstein, 2005; Pampallis & Bailey, 2021).⁸ What is not fully appreciated in the historiography of South Africa is the ‘commons mode of production’ that existed before the colonial encounter. The commons mode of production expresses the first attempts by the human species to establish a human-in-nature relationship. The palaeontological and anthropological record is developing and giving us glimpses of the most intimate human relations with nature: our first diets, the importance of indigenous biodiversity, eco-spiritualities, adaptation to difficult environmental conditions, complex renderings of rock art, fishing, farming practices and conceptions of human–nature relations that were opposed to conquering nature.

Second, a gaze back is not romantic but about trying to think critically about the materialities of the past – a straight line from the commons mode of production to present struggles for food sovereignty – to learn critical lessons about adaptation, subsistence and survival.

The role of the natural commons features in the history and reproduction of San, Khoikhoi and Bantu peoples. This was the first food sovereignty commons. The San lived with an eco-spiritual ethic in nature as hunter-gatherers. They were egalitarian, shared food and did not seek to dominate nature. Ocean fish traps, hunting and gathering happened in the context of natural abundance. The Khoikhoi herders utilised pastoral spaces with healthy grazing, carrying capacity and accessibility. If they lost their livestock due to theft or drought, the Khoikhoi easily resorted to hunting and gathering. Bantu mixed farmers were allowed land for households and for agricultural cultivation by chiefs but land, in general, was commons, not owned by anyone and ‘usufructory rights’ (rights of use) were conferred. While cattle was an important source of wealth, and control of female and unmarried young adult labour played a crucial role in organising households, land, pasture, forests, wild veld, rivers, wetlands and, in some instances, the oceans were all part of the commons.⁹

⁸ More recent history calling itself ‘New History of South Africa’ by Giliomee, Mbenga and Nasson (2022) provides a historicisation from first peoples to iron age farming communities. However, all these developments are placed within a historical chronology with an implicit bias towards linear progress and occludes a deeper understanding of ecological relations.

⁹ Guy (1987) provides an important analysis of how household female labour and unmarried young adult labour was controlled and served as the basis to organise Bantu mixed farming. However, he does not explore how natural relations were organised as a source of use value to meet needs.

While stratification existed in the latter form of commons-based subsistence societies, these were not static societies, and agricultural techniques changed over time to also work with ecological conditions. The incorporation of maize production is one instance. Moreover, chieftain control of such social orders was unstable, given that land and the commons were available beyond the aggregated household group.

Hence, in a climate crisis world, it is important to appreciate that the early commons mode of production informs us that:

- (i) millet is a drought-resistant crop;
- (ii) indigenous botanical knowledge is crucial to inform the science of agroecology to ensure resilient polyculture practices;
- (iii) customary land (about 20 per cent of South African land is still considered customary) should be used in a manner that is more ecologically sustainable;
- (iv) retrieving practices to protect seeds and biotic resources, developing more localised diets ('eating what's there') and more conscious water use practices in a water-scarce country, are some crucial areas for further research and decolonial knowledge production to ensure commoning is taken to a new level.

These are concerns of the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign.

Third, working with a commons mode of production approach to South African history also provides a more ecologically centred perspective on the genealogies of oppressions and the making of capitalism in South Africa. Most histories on the making of capitalism in South Africa, including liberal and Marxist, while successfully highlighting the connections between race, class and capitalism have occluded ecological relations. For instance, the original colonial encounter, 'frontier wars', land dispossession, the making of agro-industrial farming and ruling class projects (imperial, white nationalist, apartheid and globalising African nationalism) are all about historical waves of dispossessing the commons mode of production, instrumentalising natural relations as a 'thing' and entrenching a logic of ecocide (Satgar, 2021). Frontier wars were actually wars of defending the commons mode of production, from a subaltern perspective. As Marx (1976: 873–942) highlights in *Capital*, appropriation, racism, theft and domination are central to processes of primitive accumulation. Accumulation through ecocide in South Africa has happened through four waves of enclosure, with each being destructive for human and non-human life:

- (i) the first wave is militarised Dutch mercantile imperialism;
- (ii) British imperial expansion constitutes the second wave, also for about a century and half;
- (iii) Afrikaner nationalism with its racist, religious and modernising imaginary is the third wave; and
- (iv) globalising and financialised African nationalism from 1994 to the present is the fourth wave.

These historical waves of enclosure and destruction of the commons mode of production have serious implications for ecological justice and its place in contemporary struggles.

The Ecological Rifts of Globalised Industrial Agriculture in South Africa

The non-productivist Marx, particularly in *Capital* (in relation to the destruction of soils) and his *Ecological Notebooks* (with regard to concerns for the destruction of forests and robbery from soils), recognised more clearly the antagonism capitalism develops against nature (Saito, 2017). Marx critiqued capitalist agriculture in its 'second agricultural revolution' from 1830 to 1880, with the growth of the fertiliser industry and soil chemistry (Foster, 1999: 373). Marx's awareness of the nature–society divide was already present in his early conception of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. For John Bellamy Foster (1999), the metabolic rift Marx was concerned with assists in recognising how labour mediates the relationship with nature – the flows of energy and resources – and how this rift is implicated in a structural divide between capitalism and nature. This has evolved into ecological rift theory and analysis. As Holleman (2018: 97) points out, the conditions under which ecological rifts are engendered entail the following:

Inequality in a capitalist society – a class-based socio-economic system with its social metabolic order based on accumulation and the privatized, racialized, and gendered control of the vast majority of the land and productive infrastructure – results in an elite minority having more power to determine how production is organized, under what socio-ecological conditions we labor, and to what ends. (Holleman, 2018: 97)

South Africa, with its history of colonialism, segregation and apartheid, has produced a farming system with concentrations of racialised and gendered control of land. In the post-apartheid period, the liberalisation and financialisation of farming concentrated power even more. From about 64,000

commercial farmers in the early 1990s, today, after almost three decades of neoliberal restructuring, farming is concentrated in 40,122 units, with a few big farms (2,610) with incomes over R22.5 million, constituting 6.5 per cent of the total number of farms in the commercial agriculture industry, and accounting for 67.0 per cent of total income and 51.4 per cent of total employment. The agro-industrial farming system, with its concentrated power dynamics, in the context of one of the most unequal countries in the world, has generated several ecological rifts:

- *Super-exploitation of humans and non-human nature (soil and water)* – Agriculture in South Africa has a long history of slave-like conditions on farms, going back to colonial society. Race, gender and class shape this reality. Today, there are about 769,594 farm workers (461,693 permanent and about 295,934 seasonal). Recent attempts to mitigate the working conditions for farm workers through minimum wages has met with fierce resistance from farmers. In a recent study, Deedat et al. (2020) highlight that the agricultural sector has an 82 per cent share below the national minimum wage (second to domestic work), non-compliance was highest in agriculture at 76.4 per cent in 2019 and, in some instances, farmers withdrew non-wage benefits (such as food, transport, hospital fees and accommodation) to adjust for minimum wage compliance.

Soil is absolutely crucial for most food consumed in South Africa and the world. Half the topsoil in the world has already been lost over the past 150 years in a context in which soils take decades and sometimes centuries to revitalise. Around the world, ploughing and chemical fertilisers, which are short-term fixes, have contributed to serious soil degradation and the loss of 30 per cent of the world's arable land (Holleman, 2018: 21). Moreover, planetary boundary scientists have demonstrated that industrial agriculture, through its use of phosphorous and nitrogen, has contributed to an overshoot of these boundaries and to changing the chemistry of our planet. The disruption of land ecologies by industrial farming has prompted a global debate about the return of 'dust-bowlification'. South Africa has dry and poor soil in most areas, with our most arable soils in Mpumalanga (46.4 per cent), but this is being destroyed by coal mining (Smallhorne, 2018). The degradation of soils is a major challenge, with erosion, ploughing and chemical fertiliser use. According to Le Roux and Smith:

In quantitative terms, the average predicted soil loss rate for South Africa is 12.6 tons/ha/year, while the average soil loss rate under annual

cropland (grain crops) is 13 tons/ha/year, which is much higher than the natural soil formation rate of fewer than 5 tons/ha/year. This simply means that we are losing much more soil than we gain. (Le Roux and Smith, 2014)

Under British colonialism in the nineteenth century, imperial science contributed to dam building in South Africa and on farms. Furthermore, to enhance industrial agriculture in South Africa, from the depression in the inter-war years to the 1960s, there was massive state investment in farming irrigation systems. As a result of this, agriculture is responsible for 61 per cent of water use in South Africa and 5 per cent of water storage capacity due to private dams. In a drought-prone country with acute water inequalities that are further exacerbated by climate shocks, water control by agro-industrial farming is a recipe for conflict.

- *Unequal ecological exchange*¹⁰ – This relates to the larger ecological implications of trade relations. Occluded from immediate monetary valuation are other forms of value.

Agricultural exports from South Africa, including forestry and fisheries, was valued at R177.25 billion in 2018 (primary products were R85.91 billion and secondary products R91.34 billion). The export destinations for these products were mainly Europe, Africa and parts of Asia. Imports for the same year amounted to R129.45 billion, mostly made up of imported secondary products such as books. In monetary terms, this was a net gain and a positive in terms of trade. What these figures do not measure is the energy used (including the carbon footprint of transportation), the topsoil degraded, the biodiversity loss and even water. If these costs were priced in, South Africa's positive terms of agricultural trade would likely become negative. The narrow monetary value of exports does not give a real measure of ecological value. A full cost accounting of ecological value remains a challenge to understanding the real exchange dynamics of agricultural trade.

- *Biodiversity loss* – Industrial agriculture's contribution to gross domestic product has been declining since the 1960s, from 11 per cent to 1.8 per cent in 2020. Before and during the time span, this food system has been implicated in the destruction of biodiversity loss. The extinction of various animal species from the Quagga and the elephants in the

¹⁰ The concept of unequal ecological exchange is approached in different ways. I have chosen to focus it on the connection to the ecological rift related to global trade. Due to the lack of data on these issues, I have also gestured towards the wider implications.

Western Cape is linked to colonial expansion and early farming settlements. More recently, farmers have gained notoriety for killing cheetahs, honey badgers and leopards. According to the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), out of 23,331 species facing the risk of extinction in South Africa, 48 of these species are now extinct. Further, in the National Biodiversity Assessment of 2019, 14 per cent of South Africa's plant species and 12 per cent of animal species are threatened with extinction (SANBI, 2020). SANBI's 2018 National Biodiversity Assessment Report delves deeper into the various structural forces contributing to species extinction in South Africa (Skowno et al., 2019). In this regard, the agro-industrial food system features prominently in relation to abstracting water for dams, with negative effects on ecosystems, bio-chemical run-off into riverine systems, cultivation of crops, plantation forestry and land degradation.¹¹

- *Carbon emissions* – According to the National Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report, in 2017 agriculture contributed 48,641.80 gigatons of CO₂e, 9.5 per cent as a sector. This was second to the energy sector at 80.1 per cent. Methodologically, it is unclear how government calculates these indicators and whether carbon emissions across whole value chain activities, including carbon footprints for exports, are measured or government data just points to emissions on farms. Nonetheless, the agro-industrial food system in South Africa is locked into the climate crisis trap and its deadly feedback loops. As a drought-prone country, compounded by planetary heating, South Africa's recent drought lasted about seven years and broke the three-year cycle. According to climate science, the next drought is likely to be longer; heatwaves will also impact soil conditions, while wildfires and higher-than-average rainfall will also bring challenges.¹²
- *Hunger* – In the first half of the twentieth century, at least half a dozen famines impacted the African majority, while modern white capitalist farming thrived, including through feeding the white population, provisioning mines, accessing international markets and through state support. Wylie (2001: 59–90) provides crucial insights about three famines impacting the African majority: Pondoland (1912–1913), Lembombo Flats (1927) in the former eastern Transvaal and the Eastern Cape in 1946. We will never know the full impact of these

¹¹ These SANBI reports do not deal with the loss of honeybees in South Africa and the role of industrial agriculture in this regard.

¹² Too much rainfall in parts of the Free State and North West, in 2021, were reported as a problem for farmers in the media.

famines, but they give us a sense of the racist and ecocidal logic of modern capitalist farming. This continues into the present. Before COVID-19, about 14 million South Africans went to bed hungry. In the midst of the pandemic, with job losses and precariousness, about 30 million South Africans faced hunger. According to the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD, 2021), since the start of the Household Affordability Index in September 2020 the average cost of the Household Food Basket increased by R416.10 (10.8 per cent) from R3,856.34 in September 2020 to R4,272.44 in November 2021. This is higher than the National Minimum Wage for a General Worker, which in November 2021 was R3,643.92. Moreover, the Child Support Grant of R460 is 26 per cent below the Food Poverty Line of R624 and 38 per cent below the average cost to feed a child a basic nutritious diet of R744.96. Besides exporting food in this context and being implicated in large amounts of food waste (WWF, 2017),¹³ the agro-industrial food system has a built-in irrationality. While people starve, the bulk of yellow maize (89.4 per cent of about 5.1 million tons per annum) and soybean production (only 7 per cent produced in the country is used for human consumption) ends up as animal feed (National Agricultural Marketing Council, 2011; DALRRD, 2020).

Re-Agrarianising South Africa through Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is a counter-hegemonic concept championed by La Via Campesina, the largest social movement on earth. It was first articulated in 1996 as a counter to the food security paradigm. Today, across the planet, food sovereignty alliances, platforms and campaigns are advancing food sovereignty at different scales. In South Africa, the discourse has travelled into agrarian, food justice, solidarity economy and environmental justice spaces over the past few years. In 2014, the Cooperative and Policy Alternative, together with NGOs, small-scale farmers and activists, hosted dialogues on the food system crisis in all nine provinces. This culminated in a food crisis conference in late 2014, at which it was resolved to build a national platform of convergence for social forces wanting a food sovereignty alternative for South Africa. In 2015 the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign was launched, and it embarked on a journey to

¹³ Fruits, vegetables and cereals account for 70 per cent of the wastage and loss primarily throughout the food supply chain – from farm to fork. When energy and water are included the food waste is an ecological disaster.

translate the concept of food sovereignty for South African historical conditions and challenges. Generally, food sovereignty is understood as a critique of capitalist agriculture, a systemic alternative and movement-building process. In the preceding analysis, I have provided some insights into the emancipatory ecology critique evolving in the South African context. Below I deal with the politics of advancing food sovereignty as a systemic alternative and movement as part of the deep and just transition to achieve climate and, more generally, ecological justice.

Right to Food and Water, Ecological Justice and Ethics of Care

In section 27 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 provision is made for sufficient food and water for the citizens of the country. As argued, this is a formal right to food that will not be realised through the existing food system. Ecological rifts and the ecocidal and profit-making logic of the current system mitigate against the constitutional right to food. In its essence: food as a commodity is central to food inequality, and this challenge cannot be resolved through capitalist agrarian relations and narrow liberal constitutionalism. Hence the right to food has been claimed as the basis of an alternative food sovereignty commons system by the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (SAFSC) (COPAC, 2015). Such a claim is about transformative constitutionalism, which seeks to challenge shallow 'food security' thinking about the right to food and which merely affirms the existing agro-industrial power structure. Taking this further, the SAFSC has developed the Peoples Food Sovereignty Act, 2018 (PFSA) through three food sovereignty festivals, research and a people's parliament. The PFSA is a political hack to incite the imagining of a new food system paradigm as part of the deep and just transition to survive and prepare for worsening climate shocks. In other words, the SAFSC demonstrated that both transformative policy and legal thinking are required to end the systemic food crisis in South Africa and build the next food system. Around water, the SAFSC has worked with drought-affected communities and developed bottom-up approaches to claiming water rights as part of the water commons (COPAC, 2017).

The SAFSC conception of justice challenges liberal philosophies of justice from three perspectives:

- (i) the legal subject is not just human beings but also non-human nature. There is a recognition that social and natural relations are

interconnected, such that humans are socio-ecological beings while non-human life also has intrinsic value;

- (ii) positive freedoms and the transformative role of the state is crucial for historical redress and addressing legal harms; and
- (iii) communities and collectivities matter.

Deriving from this emancipatory ecology philosophy is a strong commitment to ecological justice within the imaginary of the SAFSC as expressed in its *Climate Justice through Land Justice* activist tool, which states: 'Ecological justice goes one step further than environmental justice (which looks at justice for people). Ecological justice includes justice for all living animals, plants, humans and the ecological systems within which they exist' (COPAC, 2019: 2). In this sense, the human is decentred and coexists amongst other life forms.

Moreover, this comes through in how the SAFSC understands both land justice and water sovereignty. In terms of land justice, the discursive framing is grounded in a premise that replacing white farmers with black farmers is not transformative, and nor is it just. In its *Food Sovereignty for the Right to Food* activist tool, it states:

Agrarian reform means more than land reform: to change relations in the countryside and in the farming sector, we need to do more than just hand over existing land from white capitalist farmers to new emerging black capitalist farmers. Agrarian reform means that we should question whether it is just and feasible for only a few people, whether black or white, to own vast amounts of land, while millions more lack access to land and the means of production. Agrarian reform means that we should increase the number of people that have access to land as well, and increase their rights and control over it. This means looking at smaller farm sizes rather than the massive farms we are used to in South Africa and which on each farm only a very small variety of crops are actually grown. (COPAC, 2015: 23)

Through its elaboration of land justice discourse, the SAFSC has married the land question to addressing historical injustice in a transformative manner and as part of a new food sovereignty commons system. Such a commitment is expressed powerfully through the PFSA and the plurivision of the Climate Justice Charter (CJC): Feeding Ourselves through Food Sovereignty.¹⁴ The CJC is committed to a commons approach to

¹⁴ The SAFSC together with partners like the Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre gave birth to the Climate Justice Charter (CJC). The CJC developed through deep dialogues in 2019 and was handed over to South Africa's Parliament on 16 October

climate and, more generally, ecological justice. These positions stand against merely reproducing the existing agro-industrial food system, which in turn replicates its existing ecological rifts, as well as its profit-making and ecocidal logic. Moreover, within such an ecological justice approach, land is located within life-enabling commons systems. Hence, the SAFSC advances a perspective on the 'eco-social function of land' (SAFSC, 2018: 8). Land is not conceived as a thing, an object, that humans can just exploit. Still, it is part of larger living ecosystems and must be utilised in a manner that enhances life in these relations. Similarly, water justice is located as part of water sovereignty. The SAFSC espouses the following conception: 'water sovereignty is about people preserving the water cycle and controlling water storage, use, access, and supply in a manner that realizes people's rights to water while meeting the needs of nature and defining the path towards a sustainable water commons' (COPAC, 2017: 2). In short, justice in this framework is about meeting human and non-human nature's needs, while ensuring the agency for affirming rights and claims lies with citizens, as socio-ecological beings.

The SAFSC was born at the onset of the first climate-induced drought (2014–2021) in South Africa. A strong praxis of ethical care came to the fore through a Hunger Tribunal in 2015 (together with the Human Rights Commission and faith-based communities), drought speak-outs and a bread march through the streets of Johannesburg in 2016, food sovereignty festivals (2015, 2016, 2017), the development of the PFSA, several tools for grassroots pathway building and the CJC process. The care for human and non-human life coalesced around three strands of thinking. First, a realisation that radical humanism, which had its hegemonic moment with the rise of the organised working-class movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century, had been pushed back by the neoliberal class project and the post-modern rejection of universals. In this context, the SAFSC attempted to reforge a non-anthropocentric but radical humanism, appreciating that humans are socio-ecological beings. A subaltern eco-humanism was being validated, recognising our imbrication in natural relations, human dependence on nature and the limits of nature. Second, eco-socialist-feminist thought highlighted the crisis of socio-ecological reproduction in households. Many women from

2020, World Food Day, to demand its adoption as per section 234 of the South African Constitution, which provides for charters to be adopted. The CJC is endorsed by over 270 organisations.

rural and working-class communities (although not self-identifying as eco-socialist-feminists) gave testimony at the Hunger Tribunal about depredations of hunger, the powerful role of women as seed savers and educators, and their frontline commitments to advancing food sovereignty placed care labour and its ethics at the heart of the SAFSC. Third, the suffering of drought-affected communities and the development of the CJC elaborated a South African conception of climate justice, which is centrally about preventing harm to the most vulnerable in our society and ensuring systemic transformation to preserve life. This praxis of care was easily extended into the COVID-19 pandemic as many food sovereignty activists rose to the challenge of feeding their communities and demanding the ‘food commons be unlocked’.¹⁵ The latter was an act of solidarity with informal traders, small-scale farmers, micro-gardeners and subsistence fishers. Grassroots women activists have been central in providing leadership in this conjunctural moment (Morgan & Cherry, 2023). Ultimately the food sovereignty system the SAFSC is reaching for is about preventing the destruction of human and non-human life; it is about creating an ecologically conscious and caring society.

The Peoples Food Sovereignty Act, Democratic Systemic Reform and the Deep and Just Transition

For the SAFSC, food sovereignty is defined as follows: ‘the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define and control their own food and agriculture systems. It is an alternative to the corporate food system’ (SAFSC, 2018:8). Such a conception, vision and articulation is a direct challenge to the African nationalist globalising class project and seeks to re-embed the food system in socio-ecological relations and to transform it. This is grounded in reimagining the governance of the commons for soil, water, biodiversity, energy, creative labour, the earth system and the cybersphere, so grassroots power from below prevails. It is about resetting the economy–nature divide. In this regard, the PFSA seeks to entrench new forms of subaltern class power – systemic, movement, direct and symbolic – that are constituted from below, not above, as part of remaking the food system.¹⁶ In less abstract

¹⁵ At the onset of COVID-19, the SAFSC convened the National Food Crisis Forum.

¹⁶ See, Satgar (2014) and Bennie and Satgoor (2018) for conceptualisations of power from below and how this links solidarity economy, food sovereignty and climate justice.

terms, this is about the democratic planning of the food system. Such an approach is not about state-centric agrarian transformation and top-down technocratic rationalities. Instead, the organic and tacit knowledge of small-scale farmers, informal traders, the landless and communities is crucial for democratic planning. In chapter 9 of the PFSA, provision is made for crucial institutional mechanisms to enable such a democratic planning approach: a national food sovereignty fund, a national food sovereignty council, a national food system democratic planning commission and local communal councils.

Central to the PFSA is utilising a democratic planning approach to the land question and, more generally, the construction on a national scale of a food sovereignty commons system anchored in local food sovereignty commoning pathways and practices. This is an alternative to a market-led approach or an authoritarian, state-centric, populist and nativist approach. Moreover, this is located within the large-scale socio-ecological transformation required for the deep and just transition and, as envisaged in the CJC, to ensure we have a food sovereignty commons system that can feed South Africa and break out of the climate crisis trap. Hence it is worth looking more closely at what the Act specifies in terms of the role of government in securing the right to land in section 10:

- (1) The government shall ensure regular land audits and maintain a proper land registry to prevent land theft and ensure fast-track redistribution to small-scale food producers.
- (2) The government shall utilize participatory mechanisms provided for in this act (in Sections 26, 27, 28, 29) to undertake proper spatial planning to ensure the development of a food sovereignty system in rural and urban areas.
- (3) The government shall deconcentrate all large farms and pass on ownership to small-scale food producers over the next 20 years. Every 5 years, 10,000 commercial farms must be deconcentrated in accordance with the Constitution.
- (4) The government shall recover costs and do what is necessary to rehabilitate land that has been damaged through pesticides, industrial farming and mining and other types of pollution.
- (5) The government shall prohibit land speculation for agricultural land.
- (6) The government shall ensure that land regulation in towns and cities does not hinder or prohibit agroecological food production, farming and food sovereignty pathways.
- (7) All these actions by government shall be informed and determined by the national food sovereignty council envisaged in this Act. (SAFSC, 2018: 13–14)

Essentially, the vision of the PFSA is not to have a state-centred and -led approach to food sovereignty but to ensure South Africa creates a small-scale farmer food sovereignty commons system to feed communities, villages, towns and cities, that is democratically planned and driven from below as part of the deep and just transition. The Act is framed as a citizen-driven process constituted from below to ensure the state is not the main actor defining, determining and constructing a food sovereignty commons system across urban and rural spaces, as part of accelerating and deepening the just transition. With this approach, the state is being transformed to think and act like a commoner. This disrupts two types of typical agrarian thinking that have informed land reform in post-apartheid South Africa (Cochet et al., 2015). The first is about the state transforming the agrarian structure through land distribution to address historical dispossessions, supporting farming practices in rural areas, defining a place of 'peasantries' in social change and state policy support. The second, mainly informed by World Bank thinking, reduces agrarian transformation to ensure the security of legal title to land, liberalisation of the agricultural sector and the establishment of a market for agrarian property transactions. In the main, these have been top-down reform practices reproducing the same food system with high ownership concentrations and numerous ecological rifts.

In contrast, the PFSA is conceived as a democratic systemic reform that can transform the entire food system as part of repositioning South Africa to address the general crisis of socio-ecological reproduction, specifically the worsening climate crisis, while addressing historical injustices (Satgar, 2019). The strategic logic of this non-state-centric concept is about constitutive forms of agential class and popular power deepening the process of transformation and ensuring the state embodies a democratising logic from below, and it in turn strengthens such a logic. Moreover, it specifies an emancipatory, utopian horizon for change while recognising that such reforms can be calibrated to be ameliorative, stronger and transformative over time. In other words, transformative change is never arrested, and its potential is kept alive even when facing historical contingencies. In relation to the land redistribution question in South Africa, such a democratic systemic reform is crucial as the basis for building consensus about a new food system and deepening transformation in a just manner. For instance, most commercial farmers in South Africa are not going to be able to handle climate extremes such as a ten-year drought or too much rain. They are going to have to embrace the deep and just transition out of necessity. In this context, the

deconcentration of big farms in South Africa can be part of a process involving subsidies to commercial farmers and as part of the deep and just transition to stabilise commercial farming as it is transformed.

Such subsidies, informed by the PFSA, would entail the following minimum conditions:

- (i) rehabilitate all land involved in chemical-based mono-industrial farming and transition all farming practices to agroecology and permaculture regeneration systems;
- (ii) ensure decarbonisation of all farming processes;
- (iii) all commercial farmers to participate in the national food sovereignty council and local communal councils as part of the just transition;
- (iv) all large-scale commercial farmers to provide a deconcentration plan, through engagement with local food sovereignty communal councils, to the national food system democratic planning commission to bring in small-scale farmers, including ensuring they have water rights.

Farmers will be compensated fairly through a Food Sovereignty Fund for land allocated to small-scale farmers. Commercial farmers in South Africa, like the state, have to become commoners. The worsening climate crisis and the more general crisis of socio-ecological reproduction requires a politics requisite to the challenges. Democratic systemic reform politics is necessary and appropriate for our times to ensure ambitious transformation can happen in limited time horizons while strengthening and deepening the democratic project.

*Commoning through Food Sovereignty Pathways in Communities,
Villages, Towns and Cities*

The PFSA has been ignored by South Africa's Parliament and key government departments, notwithstanding the debilitating impacts of South Africa's drought on commercial agriculture and hunger (2014–2021). Despite a state and power structure indifferent to the food sovereignty alternative for South Africa, in 2017 the SAFSC made a strategic decision to build the SAFSC as a grassroots movement through localised food sovereignty alliances in communities, villages, towns and cities (SAFSC, 2017). In this process, several food sovereignty activist tools were developed to build capacities for pathway building, the Act served as an overarching compass, and the idea of food sovereignty hubs as localised

support mechanisms to advance pathway building was experimented with. Initially, this rich undergrowth of pathway and hub building began with thirty sites in urban and rural spaces. In the context of COVID-19, additional pathway and hub-building sites emerged. The difficult work of consolidating these sites and scaling them up institutionally through local food sovereignty alliances, forums and hubs, as part of the deep and just transition, looms large. To assist this process, the SAFSC, together with partners, released a set of case studies covering food sovereignty pathway-building practices in three rural areas, three peri-urban areas, four towns and cities, three universities and one general case study (SAFSC et al., 2022). From these case studies, two examples of successful pathway building, institutional development and commoning the future are crucial to share to understand where these processes are tending.

Wits University, since 2015, has been a crucial site of food sovereignty pathway building. An academic supported students in setting up a food garden, and links were made with the Wits food programme, attempting to feed hundreds of students on a daily basis.¹⁷ In 2016, this relationship led to a petition calling on Wits to provide a space of dignity for food-stressed students to receive their meals and for the university to become a zero-hunger, zero-waste and zero-carbon institution. With over 8,000 signatures, the petition was well received by the university leadership, and the Wits Food Sovereignty Centre was established with its own building. This serves as a hub, which is an eco-demonstration space (including agroecology gardens), and houses a food bank, a communal kitchen for students to use to prepare meals, convenes a monthly inner-city small-scale farmers market, hosts cultural events to promote slow food and healthy local food alternatives and is linked to six agroecology gardens and an experimental food forest. The success of this pathway-building process has led to Wits agreeing to build a food commons at the university, with more fruit trees and agroecology gardens on the campus, and it has committed to setting up a second food sovereignty hub, also involving community participation. Many of the agroecology gardens at Wits have been established with campus and public involvement, such that participants have been encouraged to found pavement, backyard and community gardens as part of food sovereignty pathway-building processes. Over 150 people in and around the inner city of Johannesburg

¹⁷ I have been involved with this process since 2015 and encouraged students in one of my classes to set up a food garden, which became the springboard for food sovereignty activism on the campus.

have been involved in this learning process. The food sovereignty pathway-building work has been shared with and has had knock-on effects for the University of the Free State, Stellenbosch University, the University of Cape Town and the University of Pretoria.

A second example of food sovereignty pathway building is the hub-building work of Ukuvuna, a grassroots NGO and partner in the SAFSC. It is a powerful example in a rural part of Limpopo Province. Ukuvuna was established in 2005 and has trained over 8,000 households to grow their own food through regenerative permaculture methods. One of the key food and knowledge hub sites that Ukuvuna has built up over the years has been in the Hamakuya community in Thulamela Local Municipality in the Vhembe district, where the local hub works with 165 smallholder farmers, mainly women. In this district, there are over 1.2 million people, 54 per cent of them female, and with a 37 per cent unemployment rate for women. Through the hub, Ukuvuna has, over the past eight years, developed a smallholder support system. The system encourages indigenous knowledge sharing, food sharing, seed saving, shorter food supply chains in the community, regenerative agroecology training, networking and local trade expos.

With this food and knowledge hub as a support system, all participants have been encouraged to establish successful household food schemes. In this process, clusters of 10–15 communities have been organised. These are led by elders, women and youth to ensure knowledge transfer. Cluster leaders encourage exchange visits and skills transfer. Hub-linked clusters also work with local schools and community organisations to encourage community involvement. Throughout the cycle of farming activity, the hub provides support and training. Through its participatory action research methodology, it has also been involved in climate literacy. This process has further grounded the links between agroecology knowledge and skills around water management, soil conservation, indigenous seed revival, seed saving and plant nurseries for regenerating biodiversity.

Conclusion

Redistributive land justice in South Africa needs urgent political resolution, and it also needs a paradigm shift away from state- or market-centric approaches. A third alternative in the South African context is a food sovereignty commons approach based on strengthening existing food sovereignty pathways from below, a people- and worker-driven democratic systemic reform such as a PFSA, including democratic

planning, and ensuring South Africa has a food system with adaptation and regeneration capabilities that can ensure worsening climate shocks are mitigated. Food sovereignty is crucial for a deep and just transition process and building a food commons system in local spaces and on a macro-scale. The SAFSC has been pioneering such an approach in South Africa. Its normative praxis has been grounded in claiming the constitutional right to food as the basis for building a food sovereignty commons system, advancing ecological justice and an ethics of care. The PFSA it has developed is an invitation to think about another way forward for South Africa's ecocidal food system. It is the product of a subaltern imaginary, affirming aspirations for a future based on defending and enhancing life-enabling commons systems. Underpinning this is a rethink of the place of the commons in South African history and its crucial role in decolonising our present and future. The food sovereignty alternative is about confronting the last great dispossession of the commons, globally and in the country. It is a direct challenge to the post-apartheid state and commercial agriculture to become commoners, committed to ecological justice, to ensure we all break out of the climate crisis trap and the global crisis of socio-ecological reproduction.

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