

# Unlocking African Food Sovereignty: The Path to Food Security in South Africa

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**Abstract:** South Africa's constitutional commitments have been widely celebrated for their expansion and deepening of the country's commitment to realizing socio-economic rights. However, limited progress in guaranteeing food security threatens to compromise the nation's developmental path. To transform South Africa's food system, it is necessary to address the wider issues of who controls the food supply, which in turn influences the food chain and the food choices of individuals and communities. This research paper aims to explore the challenges and opportunities surrounding food sovereignty in South Africa, with a specific focus on unlocking the potential for food security. Through a critical analysis of the political, economic, and social factors that have contributed to the country's current food system, the paper will identify key strategies for achieving food sovereignty and security. Drawing on extensive literature review, in the field, the research will provide a comprehensive overview of the complex issues surrounding food sovereignty and its impact on South Africa's future. Ultimately, the paper seeks to provide a roadmap for unlocking Africa's food sovereignty potential and ensuring the long-term food security of its people. The paper is grounded in the African Renaissance theory.

**Keywords:** Food Security, African Food Sovereignty, Indigenous/Traditional Food Systems, Eurocentric Food Methods

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of African food sovereignty has gained significant momentum [40]. This concept aims to provide greater access to affordable and nutritious food for Africans. In simple terms, food security means an individual's or a community's access to enough safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs [8]. On the other hand, African food sovereignty refers to the right of people in Africa to determine their own food systems, which is especially important given the continent's rich agricultural tradition [40]. According to Kerr et al.,

the concept of African food sovereignty involves strengthening the connection between people and their environment, promoting sustainable land-based agricultural systems, protecting diets rich in local produce, and addressing the challenges of climate change that are impacting African food production [2].

Extrapolating from the above, African food sovereignty is the fundamental right of African nations to determine their

own food systems and policies without external interference.

To buttress on this view, Wegenast and Beck, argues that "Africans should have complete control over their seeds, land, water, and other natural resources, as well as the ability to produce, distribute, and access food as they see fit" [45]. In this regard, the importance of African food sovereignty cannot be overstated. For centuries, foreign forces have dominated the continent's food systems, leading to numerous malnourishment and health problems [10]. Kerr et al., argue that "by promoting African food sovereignty, the African continent can maintain its health, cultural heritage, and economic autonomy" [21]. Therefore, the ultimate goal is to ensure that all people have access to healthy, culturally appropriate, and sustainably produced foods.

The central premise of this paper is that Africa must prioritize the development of strong local economies for farmers and rural communities, founded on ecological principles. This approach is preferable to relying on imported processed foods or genetically modified crops, which are often controlled by multinational corporations. To achieve

this goal, it is essential to safeguard indigenous knowledge systems related to food culture and production methods. These systems can help maintain biodiversity while also meeting the dietary needs of a rapidly growing population. In the next section, the paper discusses the methodology and theoretical framework grounding the research paper.

## 2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research methodology employed in this paper is the literature review, which is grounded in the African Renaissance theory. In the following sections, the researchers will delve into both of these concepts in greater detail.

### 2.1. Literature Review Methodology

The paper employed the literature review methodology. As Dunne aptly puts it, “there is no better way to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific topic than through literature review methodology” [11]. This approach involves scouring various sources such as books, articles, internet, and other relevant documents to gather and analyze information related to the subject matter. Literature reviews are particularly useful for assessing existing studies on a particular topic and identifying any gaps or inconsistencies in the research [42]. The rationale underpinning using this method of research was premised on the need to acquire an insightful overview of current knowledge within the field. This was pertinent to enable the researchers to make more informed decisions about the topic of study.

### 2.2. African Renaissance Theory

The African Renaissance Theory has gained immense popularity in recent years, especially among African intellectuals [19]. This theory is based on the belief that African people should not be defined solely by their history of colonization and oppression [22]. Instead, it encourages them to embrace their diverse cultures as a source of strength and pride [22]. Kroecker, contends that

by drawing on the knowledge of the past and using it to guide present and future development, African nations can gain a better understanding of their identity, aspirations, and the path to achieving them [19].

The ultimate goal is to create a prosperous Africa where citizens actively contribute to the betterment of the global society. The theory is a vision of Africa that is not defined by its past, but by its potential.

Africa boasts an incredibly diverse culinary landscape, with a food sovereignty grounded in the ideals of the African Renaissance [28]. Munyai, argues that

This philosophy prioritizes self-sufficiency over foreign influences, embraces traditional knowledge and heritage, and promotes ecological sustainability, economic empowerment, and regional resilience [30].

In this sense, the African Renaissance Theory encourages Africans to take ownership of their traditional food

sovereignty by advocating for the empowerment and reclamation of African land, power, and culture. By doing so, Africans can regain control over the resources necessary to provide quality, affordable nutrition - elements that have been threatened by colonization and globalization.

Moreover, the African Renaissance Theory is a dynamic appreciation of the diverse and rich cuisine that Africa has to offer [25]. From delectable stews to mouth-watering street-side snacks like spicy plantain chips, African cuisine is a culmination of centuries of culinary exchange and innovation. This theory not only encourages the preservation of family traditions but also promotes collective liberation from health disparities caused by inadequate access to healthy foods. By celebrating the unique foods and cultures within the continent, the African Renaissance Theory supports their underlying sustainability. It has revolutionised the way individuals and communities source ingredients for their meals, revitalizing traditional agricultural practices that prioritize healthy soil management.

Furthermore, African food sovereignty plays a crucial role in protecting vulnerable economies from global corporate agribusiness while preserving ethnic identities and cultural expressions [40]. This approach also reduces dependency on imported resources. In light of this context, the following section delves into the various food security challenges that South Africa is currently facing. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of these challenges, indigenous South Africans can develop effective approaches to ensure food security and sovereignty for their communities.

## 3. Food Security Challenges in South Africa

Food security is a pressing issue that South Africa is grappling with [20]. The country is plagued by high poverty rates and sluggish economic growth, which has led to an increase in food insecurity [29]. The situation is particularly dire in rural and impoverished households, where access to nutritious and safe food is limited [7]. Unfortunately, South Africa faces a multitude of challenges in its quest to ensure food security. One of the most significant obstacles is climate change, which has led to more frequent and severe drought conditions (Louis & Mathew, 2020). This has resulted in reduced crop yields, further exacerbating the problem of food insecurity. In fact, over the past two decades, the country has experienced over 100 weather-related events that have caused significant damage to local food systems and markets [24].

The second most pressing challenge facing South Africa is the issue of food access and affordability, particularly for those living in poverty or rural areas (Aruleba & Jere, 2022). Many individuals in these communities rely on informal markets or small-scale production, both of which are highly susceptible to the effects of climate change, leaving them vulnerable to extreme food insecurity [35]. Moreover, poverty and limited access to safe, nutritious foods are also

major contributors to food insecurity, as higher prices and low wages make it difficult for individuals to obtain healthy options (Wegerif, 2020). Satterthwaite *et al.*, contend that “the impact of food insecurity on South African communities is profound, with malnourishment and stunted growth remaining prevalent among those living in poverty” [35].

Likewise, argue that “hunger, malnutrition, obesity, and poor nutrition-related health outcomes have dire consequences for the population as a whole” [33]. Furthermore, food insecurity is exacerbating gender inequality, as women often bear the brunt of sourcing and providing food for their families [4]. Wojcicki, argue that women who are unable to provide for their families are forced to turn to desperate measures, such as engaging in transactional sex or accepting abusive relationships, to secure food for themselves and their families [48].

This has led to a cycle of abuse and exploitation that perpetuates gender inequality and undermines the dignity and well-being of women. To conclude, food challenges in South Africa are multifaceted and intricate. While some regions and townships face food insecurity and malnutrition, others are grappling with the quality and safety of food. Additionally, the environmental impact of food production and consumption is a growing concern. The conundrum is that the persistent dependence on Eurocentric methods for ensuring food security has exacerbated the situation. Consequently, the research delves into the effects of such approaches on the food security of South Africa.

#### 4. Effects of Eurocentric Methods on Food Security in South Africa

The impact of Eurocentric methods on food security in South Africa is extensive and detrimental. Essentially, Eurocentric practices endorse the supremacy of European systems and have a history of colonisation that has hindered the efficacy of food security initiatives worldwide [12]. In South Africa, the Eurocentric system has significantly contributed to the disruption of traditionally-based African agricultural systems, leading to a severe food security crisis in the country (Mawere, Matshidze, Kugara & Madzivhandila, 2022).

During the colonization of South Africa by Europeans, they introduced their own agricultural systems and land management practices (Guelke, 2019). According to Guelke (2019: 174), “these practices replaced the subsistence farming methods that had been used by the indigenous populations”. Unfortunately, this led to the displacement of these populations and had a lasting impact on their access to land and food security. Mawere *et al.*, (2022: 311), argue that “the Eurocentric system devalues indigenous farming systems and instead encourages large-scale agrarian practices that are heavily reliant on pesticides, chemicals, and mechanization”. Mawere *et al.*, further argues that “these practices can contaminate soils, water supplies, and eventually, the food supply” [26]. This has resulted in a

significant impact on the environment and the health of the population.

Eurocentric views have had a significant impact on South Africa’s agricultural industry. The reliance on export-oriented farming has prioritized the production of crops that are in high demand in European markets, leading to an oversupply of these commodities (Bjornlund, Bjornlund & van Rooyen, 2022). At the same time, there has been a growing demand for non-traditional crops, which has further exacerbated the situation [3]. This has caused the prices of staple crops to plummet, making it difficult for farmers to make a living. As a result, the already vulnerable food security situation in South Africa has deteriorated further.

The Eurocentric system has permeated policies that regulate access to resources, land, and other support systems [44]. As a result, vulnerable communities face significant challenges in maintaining food security. These communities struggle to prosper because they frequently lack access to resources such as land, water, and other necessities for survival [15]. Moreover, the Eurocentric system has undermined traditional gender roles, placing women in a more precarious situation (Ndhlovu, 2019). They are less capable of accessing the necessary resources to enable their communities to practice food and farming security [32]. This has resulted in a significant gender gap in terms of access to resources and opportunities.

The Eurocentric system has perpetuated a vicious cycle of inequality and disputes, ultimately resulting in violence and civil unrest in various parts of South Africa [1]. The Eurocentric system, which prioritizes the interests of European nations and their descendants, has contributed to the marginalization of indigenous communities in South Africa [37]. This has led to a significant wealth gap, with a small percentage of the population controlling the majority of the country’s resources [21]. The resulting inequality has fueled disputes and conflicts, which have often escalated into violence and civil unrest [39]. This tumultuous environment has made it exceedingly challenging to find sustainable solutions to food security. This has resulted in a situation where many South Africans struggle to access adequate nutrition, leading to malnutrition and other health problems.

Overall, the Eurocentric ideals present significant obstacles to achieving food security sustainability in South Africa. These ideals promote inequality in terms of land access, resources, traditional gender roles, and land ownership. To truly overcome these challenges, it is imperative to challenge Eurocentric ideals and instead prioritize African indigenous approaches that are fundamental to sustainable food security. In the next section, the paper aims to explore the efficacy of African food sovereignty as a viable solution to the food security challenges faced by South Africa. By analyzing the concept of food sovereignty, the paper endeavours to provide valuable insights into the potential benefits of adopting a food sovereignty approach in South Africa.

## 5. African Sovereignty and African Food Sovereignty

The section commences by elucidating the notion of African sovereignty to establish a foundation for the concept of African food sovereignty. Subsequently, the paper delves into a comprehensive discussion of the concept of African food sovereignty.

### 5.1. African Sovereignty

The concept of African Sovereignty is of utmost importance as it promotes the idea of self-determination and the protection of human rights [38]. African sovereignty is a crucial concept that safeguards the political and economic independence of African nations [27]. The African Union Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections recognizes the fundamental right of people in Africa to self-governance, which is unfortunately under constant threat [43]. Twagirayezu, argues that “sovereignty enables states to address their needs while also engaging in collaborative decision-making with other nations, resulting in a more stable global environment” [43]. Thus, sovereignty is a crucial concept in international relations, as it allows states to exercise authority over their territory and people without external interference. This autonomy enables states to pursue their interests and goals, which may differ from those of other nations. Moreover, Musau, argues that

the UN Charter and various African Union documents validate the fact that sovereign governments must uphold ground rules governing international relations, including respecting borders, resolving conflicts peacefully, and providing civil liberties for their citizens [31].

Therefore, it is crucial to protect and support sovereignty in Africa at all levels of government.

Mihatsch, contends that “African sovereignty involves respecting the historical rights of its inhabitants, acknowledging their governmental authorities, and recognizing their ownership of natural resources” [27]. Furthermore, according to Gyapong, African sovereignty “encompasses the crucial aspect of safeguarding the distinctive cultures, traditions, values, practices, and belief systems that have been cherished and maintained in these regions for centuries” [18]. In the current context, Diamond, argues that it is imperative for Africa’s sovereign nations to avoid being used as mere pawns in the global power struggle, especially as the continent continues to witness economic growth [9]. Hence, the limited access to trade or technology should not impede the progress of the continent. In other words, African leaders must focus on the development of their own countries while also working towards regional cooperation. They must ensure that their citizens’ needs are met and that their governance system is just and fair. By doing so, they can promote African sovereignty and create a better future for their people.

In a nutshell, African sovereignty pertains to the political autonomy and self-rule of African nations. Conversely, food

sovereignty is the fundamental right of individuals to determine their own food systems and policies that prioritize local production and consumption. The impact of African sovereignty on African food sovereignty is substantial as it determines the extent of control African nations have over their food systems. Therefore, this paper delves into the concept of African food sovereignty.

### 5.2. African Food Sovereignty

African food sovereignty is the fundamental right of African nations to be self-sufficient in meeting their nutritional needs by cultivating and harvesting organic, unprocessed, and locally sourced food [36]. Claeys and Duncan, argue that “the concept aims to promote sustainable and healthy agricultural practices, increase production quality and quantity, and revive small-scale farming in Africa” [8]. Likewise, Siebert, contends that “this agricultural system empowers communities to have greater control over the production, distribution, storage, sale, and consumption of food while promoting diverse ecosystems” [40]. In this context, improving access to nutrition through local markets, enables Africans to have better access to nutritious foods, and farmers can benefit from lucrative opportunities within their own communities. Furthermore, Girard, et al., argue that “promoting a culturally relevant diet that accommodates traditional dietary preferences can contribute to improved nutrition across the continent, enhancing African food security” [14].

In essence, African food sovereignty is a critical step towards achieving food security, promoting sustainable agriculture, and empowering local communities. It is a concept that recognizes the importance of preserving traditional farming practices while embracing modern techniques to ensure that African nations can provide for their own nutritional needs. In this context, ensuring food security is crucial for South Africa’s sustainable growth and development. With population pressure, poverty, and growing food insecurity, South Africa must take responsibility for securing their own food supply. Liebenberg and De Wet, argues that

South Africa must take responsibility for securing their own food supply by promoting locally adapted cropping systems, adopting appropriate technologies and agricultural management practices, improving access to markets and financial services, investing in agricultural research and education, integrating gender-equitable policies into the agricultural sector, strengthening the capacity of farmers to manage resources more efficiently and effectively, ensuring that agriculture is a priority in national plans for economic recovery, and creating alternative sources of income for rural populations [23].

Extrapolating from the quote, to achieve food sovereignty, South Africa must focus on empowering small family farms that produce quality nutritious foods. Additionally, supporting sustainable processing industries aimed at enriching rural livelihoods is crucial. All efforts must be taken with a view to respect human dignity and human rights

standards when it comes to safeguarding South African citizens' right to have adequate access to food. It is imperative that South Africa prioritize food security as a critical issue. By doing so, South Africa can ensure sustainable growth and development for their people. This requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of food insecurity and empowers local communities to take charge of their own food supply. With the right policies and investments, South Africa can achieve food sovereignty and build a brighter future for all its citizens.

Given the pressing need to address food insecurity in South Africa, the upcoming section offers practical recommendations on how the country can achieve self-sufficiency in food production. With a growing population and increasing demand for food, it is imperative that South Africa takes proactive measures to ensure that its citizens have access to nutritious and affordable food. The following section outlines key strategies that can be implemented to achieve this goal.

## **6. Recommendations**

This section aims to provide recommendations for safeguarding the South African population against food insecurity through the use of indigenous or traditional methods of food production and preparation. These methods are a departure from the Eurocentric methodologies that have dominated the food industry for far too long. Indigenous knowledge systems are an incredible asset for promoting food security. By renewing and sustaining these local food systems, indigenous Black South Africans can secure their own food security while simultaneously protecting the environment. This will not only benefit the South African population but also promote cultural preservation and sustainability. The recommendations are discussed below.

### **6.1. Preservation of Traditional Agricultural Practices**

The paper recommends the adoption of indigenous farming practices, which frequently employ sustainable and natural methods, as a means of advancing food sovereignty. This necessitates a transformation of agricultural extension services to integrate and value the traditional knowledge of African farmers. By incorporating traditional agricultural practices like natural pest management, intercropping, and crop rotation, the production of indigenous crops can be significantly enhanced.

### **6.2. Promotion of Local Seed Diversity**

This paper advocates for the cultivation of native and locally adapted crops in their natural form, rather than relying solely on hybrid seeds. It is imperative for farmers to maintain their seed banks, which not only provide them with a diverse range of seed options but also contribute to the preservation of South Africa's biodiversity. To ensure sustainable agriculture practices, it is crucial to prioritize the use of indigenous crops that have adapted to the local

environment over time. This approach not only promotes ecological balance but also enhances the resilience of the agricultural system.

### **6.3. Reframing the Consumption Narrative of Indigenous Food**

The paper proposes a reframing of the narrative surrounding the consumption of indigenous food. In order to establish a food system centered on indigenous foods, it is crucial to address the mindsets of consumers. Through promoting a positive food narrative that emphasizes the nutritional and ecological benefits of indigenous foods, we can encourage their consumption and foster local economies built around these foods. To achieve this goal, it is essential to educate consumers about the value of indigenous foods and their role in promoting sustainable food systems.

### **6.4. Linking Markets and Farmers**

The paper proposes a strategy to empower smallholder farmers by facilitating their access to new and expanded markets. This approach aims to ensure that farmers receive a fair price for their harvests, while also generating a significant return on investment. Implementing this strategy creates a more equitable and sustainable agricultural system that benefits both farmers and consumers.

### **6.5. Encouraging Small-Scale Processors**

The paper recommends developing small-scale processing plants for indigenous grains, vegetables, and fruits to complement the large-scale processing facilities that currently exist. This will promote the local consumption of indigenous foods while encouraging small-scale farmers to make a significant income from their crops.

### **6.6. Focus on Food Education for Children**

The paper proposes the implementation of food education for children. Specifically, it suggests providing primary school children with education on food production, preparation, and nutritional value. This approach can serve as a solid foundation for instilling cultural values that promote the use of indigenous crops and traditional practices.

### **6.7. Building a Collaborative Network for Food Project**

The paper proposes the implementation of collaborative networks in food projects. Through forming food cooperatives, family farmers can benefit from sharing ideas, working together, gaining leverage in bargaining power, and establishing connections with other stakeholders in the food system. This approach can lead to increased efficiency, productivity, and profitability for all involved parties. Additionally, it can foster a sense of community and promote sustainable practices in the food industry. Therefore, it is recommended that food cooperatives be considered as a viable option for enhancing the success of food projects.

### 6.8. Supportive Government Policies

It is imperative that the government recognizes the importance of indigenous foods in promoting a healthy and sustainable food system. Through incorporating traditional practices in agriculture, the country can preserve its cultural heritage while also promoting local food production. Additionally, providing adequate subsidies to smallholder farmers will enable them to invest in their farms and increase their productivity, thereby contributing to the country's food security.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, ensuring food security in South Africa requires unleashing African food sovereignty. The contemporary food system is dominated by large-scale commercial (Eurocentric) farming, which puts profit before sustainability and community well-being despite the nation's strong agricultural past and huge fertile territory. To attain food sovereignty, South Africa must give small-scale farmers top priority, support local food systems, and develop socially and environmentally responsible agroecology methods. In order to achieve this, there needs to be a dramatic shift in policy and funding in favor of decentralized, participatory strategies that enable communities to take charge of their own food systems.

By doing this, South Africa can encourage economic growth and environmental sustainability while ensuring that all of its citizens have access to wholesome, nutritive, and culturally relevant food. To do this, South Africa must give small-scale farmers' needs top priority and support their initiatives to produce and distribute food locally. Furthermore, South Africa must support agroecology approaches like crop rotation, intercropping, and organic pest control that are both environmentally sound and socially just. Through unlocking the potential of African food sovereignty, South Africa has the opportunity to create a more equitable and sustainable food system that benefits all its citizens. This will not only improve access to healthy food but also promote economic development and environmental sustainability. It is imperative for South Africa to prioritize the needs of its people and take control of its own food system.

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