

**LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS: A CASE STUDY ON SMALLHOLDER FARMERS IN
OZWATHINI, KWA-ZULU NATAL,**



Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) formulated by the UN are a global call to eradicate poverty, reduce the effects of climate change and enhance food security, amongst others. SDG number 2, focuses on ending hunger, and promoting sustainable food production. According to Willet *et al* (2019), the realisation of this goal requires implementation of transformative measures across the food system. A food system encompasses the various processes that influence food production and consumption. Due to their integrated nature, food systems are influenced by various factors such as population growth, climate change, policy change, urbanisation and technology advancement (Kushitor *et al*, 2022) . Sustainable food systems promote social-cultural advancement in light of food security, are fiscally viable, i.e. generate economic benefits for the various role players and support the equitable distribution of resources. Weak or dysfunctional food systems perpetuate poverty, lead to increased levels of food insecurity, social and political instability.

Food Systems in South Africa

The South African food system is paradoxical in nature. It is characterised by a dualistic agrarian system, high levels of poverty as well as socio-economic inequality. According to various studies, South Africa is food secure at national level. However, increasing levels of hunger and malnutrition at household level remain a cause for concern. The SANHANES-1 survey (South African National Health and Nutrition Examinations Survey) stipulated that 45.6 % of the population is food secure. Conversely, this means more than half of the population is faced with food insecurity. The statistics also revealed that hunger is most prevalent in urban informal and rural formal areas of which the African race group has the highest level of food insecurity. Further to that, the country is faced with a triple threat of malnutrition where cases of stunting, wasting and under nutrition in young children have been reported (Pereira, 2014).

The province of KwaZulu-Natal is characterised by high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality. It is estimated that half of all rural households in the province live in poverty and lack access to proper sanitation. Moreover, the advent of climate change has negatively impacted production, further deepening food security challenges. Due to its high rural population, the province also has the highest levels of grant recipients which currently stands at 4 million, equating to 22% of all grant recipients (Hlahla *et al*, 2023). Some studies suggest that livelihoods are becoming increasingly separated from agriculture as a result of urbanization in search for better opportunities. In rural areas, access to government grants has been described as the primary factor which drives the purchasing of food. Subsequently, people have become more reliant on local shops and supermarkets as opposed to producing

their own food (Pereira, 2014). This article is a case study on food systems and smallholder farmers in Ozwathini, KwaZulu Natal.

Smallholder Farming Systems in Ozwathini

Ozwathini is a rural community situated in the Midlands of KwaZulu Natal. It is characterized by small farming communities where various commodities are grown including maize, beans, potatoes, amadumbe, sweet potatoes, sugar cane and vegetables. The farmers also keep livestock, mainly cattle, goats, pigs and poultry. The area is sub-tropical with high rainfall and misty conditions in summer and some frost in winter. The farmers receive support both from government and civil society organizations. Mahlathini Development Foundation (MDF) started working in the area in 2018 and set up a conservation agriculture learning group, which has since grown to include climate resilient agriculture, micro finance, livestock and marketing. The farmers also receive support from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD).

Farming is practised primarily for selling and also for household consumption. Aside from farming, the participants also depend on government grants and remittances to support their families. Others have side businesses such as spaza shops and others are retired. Some work in ward committees and play a substantial role in addressing social issues pertaining to health and food security. The age groups range between 40 and 80 years old. The majority of the organised farming groups are comprised of women. The area has been severely impacted by climate change which has led to a perpetual decline in maize yields and income over the years. Recent heavy rainfalls, soil degradation and pest outbreaks have also caused crop damage especially on beans and vegetables which also adversely affected income. The farmers grow food for the informal market, namely their neighbours, bakkie traders and for a short period, school feeding schemes. Market access remains a serious constraint for smallholder farmers in the area. Through the assistance of Mahlathini Development Foundation (MDF), farmers from the learning groups set up a monthly market in Bhamshela which has been in operation for more than 2 years. The market lasts two to three days each month depending on produce availability and level of demand. Mahlathini also supports two savings groups in the area which meet monthly. These groups serve as money banks and also as a source of small credit for business purposes.

Farming plays a pivotal part in household food security in the area. Farmers employ various farming activities to support their food security needs. In recent years they have incorporated improved farming practices such as intercropping, crop rotation and minimum soil disturbance to slow down erosion and improve yields, in their farming systems. They also apply organic farming practices in their gardens to help minimize reliance on external inputs and have

increased crop diversity in their food gardens to include herbs and new unfamiliar vegetable types. In terms of livestock, the farmers farm mainly cattle, goats and poultry. The cattle are communally grazed, however those raised on artificial milk are fed maize stover and cover crops such as sunflower, sorghum, millet, black oats, fodder rye and fodder radish amongst others. In terms of poultry, they have layers and broilers as well as Boschvelders which is a multipurpose breed. Poultry provides a source of protein in the form of meat and eggs and is also a very useful source of income. Some of the farmers sell inputs such as seeds, seedlings and herbicides to supplement their household income. They also sell 6-8 month old calves. Pigs are slaughtered and sold locally, some farmers have brought pork to sell at the market which often sells out.

A recent resilience assessment for these farmers has shown much improved food security, diversity of production, implementation of climate resilient agriculture practices and much improved incomes in the range of R3 300 on average per month from their combined marketing of vegetables, field crops and livestock products, with a much larger reliance on locally produced food in their homesteads.

References

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