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ROOTED IN CHANGE: CULTIVATING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND AGROECOLOGY FOR A JUST FUTURE

SAFSC NEWSLETTER 31

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Editorial

As we step into the New Year, this edition presents us an opportunity to reflect, look forward, and recommit to the values that guide our activism. This edition marks not just a fresh start, but an opportunity to reaffrim our dedication to food sovereingty. The challenges we face- climate change, land inequality, and and systemic hunger- are immense, but so too is the potential for transformative change.

Food sovereingty remains at the heart of this transformative change. It is a vision that goes beyond just food security, where agricultural practices help regenerate the land rather than deplete it, and where the rights of small-scale food growers and marginalized groups are upheld.

The past year has shown us both the fragility of our current food systems and the resilience of those working to change them. This transformative change spans grassroots movements advocating for land rights to innovative projects tackling food waste and promoting agroecology. These efforts remind us that real change often starts from the ground, driven up by the collective action of those most affected by inequality and injustice.

As we look ahead, let us carry this spirit of resilience and innovation into the new year. Let us continue to challenge the structures that perpetuate hunger and inequality, and work toward a food system that prioritizes people and the planet over profit. This year, let us deepen our commitment to food sovereignty, not just as a concept, but as a lived reality for communities everywhere

Here’s to a year of growth, solidarity, and meaningful change. Together, we can build a future where everyone has access to nutritious food, where the land is cared for, and where communities thrive.

NATIONAL NEWS

FOOD SOVEREINGTY: RESHAPING AGRARIAN REFORM TO ADDRESS HUNGER

By Wade Parker

Hunger in South Africa is not just about food scarcity—it is a result of systemic land inequality. Colonial dispossession and apartheid policies concentrated land ownership, forcing small-scale farmers and rural communities into cycles of poverty and dependence. Agrarian reform aims to correct these injustices, but political resistance, inadequate state support, and global market forces continue to undermine progress.

Food sovereignty must shape agrarian reform goals. It challenges market-driven approaches that prioritise commercial agriculture over local food systems. Instead of focusing only on land redistribution, food sovereignty calls for community control over food production, access to resources, and policies that protect small-scale farmers from corporate dominance. Without this shift, agrarian reform risks reproducing inequalities rather than dismantling them.

The Role of Grassroots Movements

Land reform in South Africa is slow and fragmented, leaving rural communities without secure tenure or sustainable livelihoods. In Goedgegundt and Malmesbury in the Western Cape, dual land occupiers face eviction because policies fail to integrate land, housing, and farming. Such disconnections disrupt local food systems, forcing people into urban poverty and reducing access to nutritious food. These struggles highlight the urgent need for policy coherence and grassroots-driven solutions.

The Surplus People Project (SPP) works alongside farmworkers and small-scale producers to advance food sovereignty through movement-building. This includes resisting evictions, strengthening community-led governance of land, and promoting agroecological farming to enhance climate resilience. Women farmers are central to these efforts, leading local food networks and reclaiming decision-making power.

For agrarian reform to be meaningful, government must move beyond bureaucratic inefficiencies and political reluctance. Policies must align with food sovereignty principles, ensuring land reform supports community-driven food systems, not corporate agriculture. By centring justice, equity, and sustainability, agrarian reform can become a tool for genuine transformation—one that secures food sovereignty and dismantles structural hunger.

LOCAL NEWS

BEYOND FOOD SECURITY: A FOOD SOVEREIGNTY CRITIQUE OF THE NFNSP EVALUATION REPORT

By Qhawekazi Mahlalela

In an attempt to address the hunger crisis, the Implementation Evaluation of the National Food and Nutrition Security Plan (NFNSP) looks into the progress, and outcomes of South Africa's National Food and Nutrition Security Plan and investigates how the Plan has achieved its strategic objectives. While the report takes a full look into the NFNSP's impact, it still largely operates within a food security framework, which focuses more on giving communities access to sufficient food as opposed to achieving food sovereignty, which emphasizes local control, agroecology, and systemic transformation of the food system.

Due to its fixation on food security, the NFNSP report has significant limitations when looked at in from the food sovereignty lens. Food sovereignty prioritizes the rights of small-scale farmers, indigenous communities, and marginalized groups to define their own food systems, practice climate just agricultural, and resist corporate control and as such, the NFNSP falls short in several key areas when viewed through this lens, particularly in its top-down approach, its over-reliance on market-driven solutions, and its failure to address structural inequalities within our food systems.

To align with food sovereignty principles, the NFNSP Evaluation Report must shift from its current top-down approach, and instead shift to an approach that empowers local communities, small-scale farmers, and civil society in decision-making processes. At SAFSC, our vision of food sovereignty prefers bottom-up interventions that allows communities the necessary autonomy to define their own food systems. While the report acknowledges the importance of localized, context-specific actions (Recommendation R1.6), it does not go far enough in advocating for the redistribution of agency to local actors along food supply chains. There is a jarring absence of meaningful engagement with smallholder farmers, women, and marginalized groups in the design and implementation of the Plan which could undermine its potential to achieve equitable and climate just food systems. The Peoples' Food Sovereignty Act calls for democratic and participatory systems such as Local Communal Councils and National Food Sovereignty Councils, ensuring that communities have direct control over their food systems. The NFNSP Evaluation Report must propose similar structures to ensure that future iterations of the Plan are truly community-driven and grassroots.

The NFNSP Evaluation Report must also move away from its reliance on market-driven solutions. These solutions tend to prioritize commercial interests at the expense of the needs of small scale producers. An example of this is the report's focus on market integration and certification schemes (e.g. SA GAP) which may risk excluding small-scale farmers who lack the resources to meet these strict standards, further marginalizing them. The Peoples' Food Sovereignty Act challenges this by rejecting corporate-controlled food systems and promotes agroecology as a science and a way of life. The NFNSP report must address critical issues such as breaking seed monopolies to ensure that future food systems are ecologically sound and climate just.

The NFNSP report must prioritize the inclusion of the informal sector and urban food systems into its framework. While the report briefly mentions these elements (Recommendation R1.5), it does not sufficinetlly address the key role of agroecology in achieving food sovereignty. Agroecology is a cornerstone of the SAFSC's vision, as it promotes climate just farming practices, reduces dependency on external inputs, and strengthens local food systems. The NFNSP's failure to prioritize agroecological approaches reflects a broader neglect of ecological and social dimensions of combating the hunger crisis.

The informal sector, which plays a critical role in feeding millions of South Africans, is largely overlooked in the Plan's strategies. The Peoples' Food Sovereignty Act places agroecology at the centre of its vision, calling for the transition from industrial agriculture to agroecological practices. The NFNSP Evaluation Report must address the structural inequalities that perpetuate hunger, such as land dispossession. Land justice is crucial in SAFSC's vision for food sovereignty. In response to the land question, the Peoples' Food Sovereignty Act calls for deconcentrating large farms and redistributing land to small-scale food growers. It also advocates for mechanisms for land audits and participatory planning.

Furthermore, due to significant economic constraints, low-income households in South Africa are forced to rely on cheap, highly processed food. As an alternative, building local food sovereignty pathways using agroecology can produce nutritious and culturally appropriate food, which not only improves health and wellbeing but also reduces the quantity of food needed because people's bodies receive the right nutrients. The SAFSC supports the call for a substantive universal basic income grant (UBIG) as part of the deep just transition to cushion society against climate shocks to our food system. A UBIG would provide households with the financial means to access nutritious food, invest in local food systems, and reduce their dependency on cheap, unhealthy alternatives. This approach aligns with the SAFSC's vision of a just and equitable food system.

The NFNSP report attempts to provide insights into the challenges of implementing a national food security plan, but it must align with the SAFSC's vision of food sovereignty to achieve meaningful change within our food systems. The Plan's market-driven approach neglects the needs of small-scale farmers, and marginalized farming communities. To move towards a South African future that has achieved food sovereignty, the NFNSP must shift its focus towards empowering local communities, promoting agroecological practices, and addressing the root causes of the hunger crisis. Without these changes, the Plan risks perpetuating the very inequalities it seeks to overcome.

SPOTLIGHT: BAKHUSELE MATHUPHA – CULTIVATING HOPE AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN THE EASTERN CAPE

In the heart of the Eastern Cape, where rolling hills meet blue skies, lies the village of Gatyane. As a response too challenges such as hunger and unemployment, community members such as, Bakhusele Mathupha is sowing the seeds of change. As the founder of a rural agroecology cooperative Phawu Likum AgriPak (PLA), Mathupha has developed a food forest in Gatyane to disrupt the hunger crisis, restore vulnerable ecosystems, and empower the community with the agency to define their food systems. The work in Gatyane exemplifies the transformative power of agroecology and collective action in addressing South Africa's most pressing challenges. One of PLA's most significant achievements is its focus on empowering women and youth, who are often disproportionately affected by food insecurity. In many rural communities, women bear the brunt of food scarcity, often going hungry to ensure their children are fed.PLA has expanded to include eight families, who all collectively participate in building this food pathway. The cooperative approach ensures that knowledge and resources are shared, fostering an interconnected and resilient community.

Cross posted from Farmers Weekly

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

DRC CONFLICT: SOUTHERN AND EASTERN AFRICAN LA VIA CAMPESINA CALLS FOR INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY, FLAGS ATTACKS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

By La Via Campesina

In a statement issued on 25th February 2025, the La Via Campesina Southern and Eastern Africa (LVC SEAf) region is calling for international solidarity for peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo, following the recent intensification of the armed conflict and the worsening security situation in the North and South Kivu provinces. This conflict has been brewing since late 2021 when the various armed groups under the umbrella of the M23 took up arms against the government, claiming for sovereignty over this territory.

The M23 has, since beginning of this year, taken over large swathes of territories in the eastern part of the country, including Goma the capital of the North Kivu province, which borders Rwanda. the recent escalation of the armed conflict to control this mineral rich province fits well as a proxy-conflict in the broader context of the restructuring of global power structure.

For yet another time, since January 2025, thousands of people have been killed, hundreds of thousands have been forced to leave their houses and fields, forced to wander along the roads and to join the refugee camps. The two Kivu provinces were already home to over 4 million refugees (internally displaced people). The recent escalation has harshly worsened their situation. Many of the affected people are peasants, and their families were beginning to rebuild their lives following a brief respite in the decades old conflict. Today they are again forced to relocate, and prohibited from accessing their fields, their cattle and their crops, their sources of livelihood.

In this war, women and young girls are regularly violated. Populations are tragically terrorized with impunity as a means of warfare. It is impossible to establish a stable society, and thereby their food sovereignty, in a territory where there is no peace and respect to basic human rights and dignity.

We stand in solidarity with our member organisation, the Confédération Paysanne du Congo (Peasant Confederation of Congo), COPACO-PRP, in DRC and all the communities affected by this conflict.

We call on all the members of La Via Campesina to organise in their countries in solidarity with the people of DRC and demand their governments to take measures to bring about a ceasefire and lasting peace so that the displaced peasant families can return to their homes, and engage in their agricultural activities.

We call on all governments whose transnational corporations are involved in the resource extraction in the eastern DRC, to take measures to halt the flow of blood money which is fuelling this conflict.
We call on the governments, the African Union and other regional economic and political blocs the Southern African Development Community (SADC), East African Community (EAC) and Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) to denounce the recent escalation in eastern DRC and promote dialogue towards lasting peace.

We call the UN Working group on Peasants' Rights (UNDROP) to condemn the violation of peasants rights as started in Articles 5, 13, 15, 17, 24 and 27. We are demanding that the UN Working Group immediately establish a special mechanism to intervene the ongoing conflicts in DRC so that peasants and other people working in rural areas of the entire DRC could enjoy their rights as human beings and their right to produce food within their territory.

Cross posted from La Via Campesina

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY PATHWAY BUILDING

SAFSC AGROECOLOGY TRAINING AT WITS

By Sizwe Manqele

The lessons I learned during the agroecology training were incredibly valuable and confirmed a long-held suspicion of mine: things are supposed to be natural. The way we currently approach agriculture often feels disconnected from this truth.

The crash course in agroecology not only clarified my suspicions but also gave me the confidence to articulate and act on them. I had always felt there was a better way, but I didn't know it could actually be done—or that it had already been successfully implemented elsewhere.

I decided to test these principles in our Ikamvalethu food garden. For years, we'd struggled with a particular weed that seemed impossible to manage. Instead of fighting it, I incorporated the weeds into our garden beds. Of course, this required a lengthy explanation to my colleagues about the "crazy things" I'd learned at Wits University. At first, the idea of working with nature—rather than against it—was met with resistance. But within a few weeks, the garden began to transform. Bees and birds flocked to the space, and the garden buzzed with life. Even my colleague, who studied agriculture at Stellenbosch University, was amazed. They couldn't believe that a plan which seemed so unconventional was not only working but exceeding expectations.

I experimented with the concept of emergents—arranging plants by height to block wind and provide shade for shorter plants, like pumpkins. I used chamomile flowers, which we'd always seen as a nuisance, to create shade and protect against harsh winds. Unfortunately, the plan didn't last. My colleagues at the Ikamvalethu food garden focused primarily on the crops and neglected the other plants in between. The chamomile and other plants weren't watered, and the mulch—which protected the soil from heat—wasn't replaced after being blown away by strong winds. I exhausted myself trying to maintain the ecosystem, but without collective effort, it wasn't sustainable. Agroecology works, but it requires time, effort, and collaboration. On my own farm, I'm still experimenting with fencing and allowing nature to grow freely instead of planting windbreakers. This approach comes with its own challenges, like managing pests that thrive in natural environments versus the crops I'm growing. It's a learning process, but one I'm committed to. Agroecology isn't just a method—it's a mindset, and I'm excited to keep exploring its potential.

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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF AGROFORESTRY.

By Charles Simane

The South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (SAFSC) is now in its eleventh year of building systemic food sovereignty alternatives from below in villages, towns and cities. From its launch in 2014, SAFSC has been committed to the transformation of South Africa's food system. The current mono-industrial farming system is unsustainable and has proven unable to deal with worsening climate extremes as evidenced by the El Nino induced drought that started in 2014. This was the worst El Niño induced meteorological drought in a century. It was worse than the droughts of the 1920s, the 1970s, and the drought of 2003 which led President Mbeki to declare six provinces disaster zones. The 2014 drought was the third super El Niño in just thirty years. El Niño events had a cycle of 20 years but climate change is making them more frequent and extremely severe. By the end of 2015, the drought had resulted in the death of 45,000 cattle in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). In the municipalities of Uthukela and uMzinyati, 42% of the cattle and 28% of the goats perished, as rainfall across the province fell to just 343 mm. In the Eastern Cape, subsistence farmers who primarily depend on rain-fed agriculture faced devastating losses, leading to increased levels of hunger. These climate shocks which are wrongly called natural disasters, highlights the urgent need for transformation of the food system.

One of the ways to bring about this transformation is to change the way food is produced. Industrial agriculture is mainly based on large fields of monocrops. These monocrops are defenceless against pests, they require pesticides, insecticides, fungicides and other toxic chemical inputs to protect them. They are also unable to enrich the soil hence they require large chemical fertilizers for nitrogen fixation. The consequence of this farming method is that it has high input costs, uses water inefficiently, and poisons the soil and the water table while harming farmers' and workers' health, not to mention that it destroys biodiversity. Global agriculture is the leading cause of biodiversity loss, with agriculture ' being the identified threat to 24,000 of the 28,000 (86%) species at risk of extinction.'

Fortunately, as SAFSC has argued and demonstrated for the last ten years, there are systemic solutions from below. One of such transformative farming methods is agroforestry. Although some have presented it as a new way of farming, it is actually not a new thing. Agroforestry was the first farming method adopted by humans. Evidence from the Neolithic revolution proves this. Across the fertile crescent, evidence shows that olive trees, figs, and date palms were domesticated and planted alongside crops. The same thing can be observed in the Gedeo cultural landscape in Ethiopia where the Gedeo people have been growing enset and coffee under large trees. Also, emerging ecological evidence from dendrology (the study of trees) shows that the Amazon rainforest is not as pristine as once thought. It has been shaped and moulded by the Amazonian civilisations for thousands of years and it is in fact the largest agroforestry project in the world.

Agroforestry is crucial for:
-Soil health: reducing erosion, increasing organic matter, and enhancing nutrient cycling.
-Water commons: replenishing the water table, retaining moisture
-Carbon Sequestration: sequests carbon in the soil, no till agriculture
-Crop production: improves crop yield and quality
-Cost effective: reducing input costs and provides alternative sources of income from trees and crops and livestock.
-Regenerates ecosystems: enhances biodiversity by imitating the natural environment

The SAFSC has recently hosted two agroforestry training workshops for activists across the country. The first ran from the 14th to the 20th of September 2024 and the second training took place from the 13th to the 19th of February 2025. The first agroforestry training focused on responding to systemic risks and climate extremes and the second training focused on seed saving systems. In both workshops, the first part of the training was for students and volunteers who are part of the SAFSC Food Sovereignty Centre at Wits University. SAFSC is committed to addressing student hunger through systemic solutions. The second part of the training was for key activists coming from different communities across the country. This is in line with SAFSC's goal of building food sovereignty pathways and alternatives in villages, towns and cities.

In both training sessions, representatives came from various organisations and sectors.The training empowered participants with practical skills and knowledge to implement in their local contexts and strengthen their own local food sovereignty pathways. It also provided resources and knowledge for setting up decentralised food sovereignty hubs with localised seed banks, building climate resilience with agroforestry, and regenerating ecosystems with a closed-loop zero-input cost approach. The participants left with an in-depth understanding of agroforestry, seed harvesting, saving and sharing. The SAFSC will continue to promote agroforestry as a means to transform the food systems and protect the life-enabling commons. Agroforestry demonstrates that the production of food does not have to mean the destruction of the planet and more than human life world.

REVIVING CALABASH FARMING, A FORGOTTEN GEM IN AN AGROECOLOGICAL SYSTEM

By Dorothy Yegon

In a world where modern farming methods dominate and ancient yet sustainable agricultural practice is slowly fading into obscurity. Calabash farming, once a thriving traditional among small holder farmers is part of the agroecological systems that has been largely forgotten but holds the potential for s revival that could bring both ecological and domestic benefits. Calabash a versatile crop with a myriad of uses are type of gourd that thrives in tropical and subtropical climates. Historically they have been grown not only for food and medicinal purposes but also for their use in crafting everyday tools, utensils and musical instruments. The hard shell of calabash can be transformed into cups bowls and even decorative pieces, while the seeds and pulp have provided sustenance to many communities.

However, the calabashs place in agroecology has diminished particularly in regions where modern industrial farming practices have taken precedence. Intensive monoculture practices synthetic fertilisers and pesticides have pushed out indigenous and more diverse farming systems, including the cultivation of calabash. In many places the crop is no longer widely grown and its uses have been overlooked in favor of high yielding mass-market crops. By reintroducing this crop into modern agroecological systems, we can embrace a farming approach that supports ecological health while providing economic opportunities for smallholder farmers.

One of the key benefits of calabash farming within agroecology is its ability to grow without heavy reliance on chemical on reliance on chemical inputs . Calabash are hardly plants that can grow in diverse conditions and contribute to soil health by maintaining a balance in the ecosystem. They can act as form of natural pest control when grown alongside the crops, promoting a harmonious relationship between plants and local wildlife.

The cultivation of calabash also supports water retention in the soil which is crucial in areas prone to drought. Beyond its environmental benefits the calabash has a potential to boost local economies. With growing demand for sustainable eco-friendly products, the calabash-derived goods such as eco-friendly containers, jewelry and artwork are gaining fraction in global markets. If farmers can revive the cultivation of calabash , they can tap into a niche market while simultaneously promoting a return to more traditional sustainable farming practices.

Furthermore the revival of calabash farming could help combat the challenges posed by climate change. By encouraging biodiversity and supporting resilient farming systems agroecological methods like calabash cultivation are adaptable and capable of withstanding extreme weather patterns which are becoming increasingly common across the globe.

The story of calabash farming is not just about ab ancient traditional waiting to be revived, it is about creating a future where agriculture can co-exist with nature , providing food resources and economic opportunities without compromising the planets health. In reintroducing this forgotten gem into agroecology, we can preserve a part of our agricultural heritage while building,a more sustainable future for generations to come.

SOLIDARITY ECONOMY NEWS

PIONEERING ZERO ORGANIC WASTE TO LANDFILL: THE ZWASA AND CAPE AGULHAS MUNICIPALITY PARTNERSHIP IN ZWELITSHA TOWN

By Keith Roman

The Zero Waste Association of South Africa (ZWASA) in a formal partnership with the Cape Agulhas Municipality (CAM) established a Zero Organic Waste to Landfill (ZWTL) Project to divert organic waste from landfill by the separation-of-organic-waste-at-source; organic composting, vermicomposting; organic vegetable farming and the facilitation of community food feeding schemes with the local Educare Centre and Malnutrition Centre in Zwelitsha Town.

Twelve wastepickers and local unemployed youth were trained in organic composting; sustainable regenerative organic vegetable farming; and zero waste circular economy systems. The ZWTL system will create substantial environmental; health; food sustainability; job creation; and socio-economic benefits for the municipality and its communities.

Empirical evidence has shown that circular economy / zero waste systems create the most jobs and are financially, environmentally and socio-economically the most efficient systems. Zero Waste strategies create over 200 times as many jobs as landfills and incinerators. The CAM and ZWASA ZOWTL system was adapted from benchmark Zero Waste cities like San Francisco (USA); San Fernando (Philippines}; and Treviso Province (Italy) which has reduced its residual waste rate to 56-kg / per person / year! To put their successes into perspective, South Africa's average residual waste rate is 1-tonne per person per year!

The ZWASA and Cape Agulhas Municipality ZOWTL Project is on track to establish Zwelitsha Town as the first Zero Organic Waste to Landfill Town in South Africa to achieve a 100% diversion of organic waste from landfill by 2027. The main reasons why Zwelitsha will be the first are because of the following: 1) The Municipality has successfully separated-organic-waste-at-source – an essential step to effectively divert organic waste from landfill. 2) The Municipality has the institutional capacity through strong partnerships to achieve the project objectives. 3) Ongoing Education, Awareness, and mobilization of community buy-in and support. 4) Establishment of an appropriate Pay-as-you-Throw ("PAYT") incentive scheme which incentivizes diversion, minimization, and beneficiation but also discourages residual waste. 5) Most municipalities in South Africa are having trouble breaking away from their linear landfill culture and the mistaken belief that landfilling is the cheapest option. It is not the cheapest option. The adoption of zero waste circular economy systems will create much-needed new jobs and community upliftment and contribute significantly to financial, environmental, health, and socio-economic benefits for the municipality and its community.

ACTIVIST TOOLS

Visit our websites: We have several activist's tools from mapping tools, to training guides and visual tools and others. All of these are important activist's tools! https://www.safsc.org.za/ , https://cjcm.org.za/

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Closing the Loop: Food Sovereignty and Zero Waste: https://youtu.be/qr5MCUunuHw?si=hK3beyC4v9qBEfy7

Food Sovereignty as Emancipatory Feminism: https://youtu.be/wfT03mrprk8?si=unGSnOwKMhb1GmFH

Book launch of Beyond Expropriation Without Compensation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQHmjWE8BVU

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