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# An assessment of support for agroecology in South Africa's policy landscape

POLICY BRIEF

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The African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) is committed to dismantling inequalities and resisting corporate industrial expansion in Africa's food and agriculture systems.

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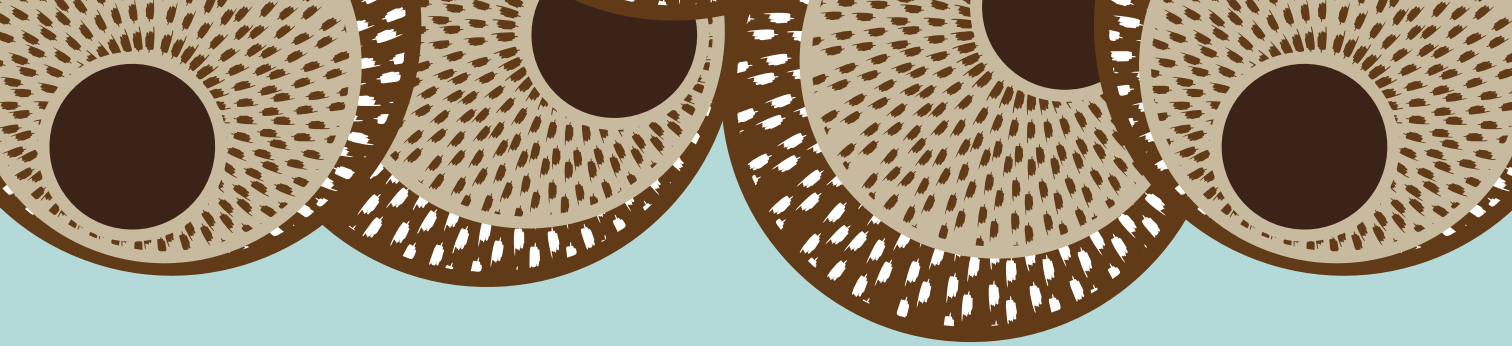
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Please see the full report [here](#)



# Introduction

Agroecology is gaining traction globally and in South Africa, and there are growing calls from practitioners and organisations for government to co-develop a national agroecology strategy for South Africa. Such a strategy can serve to integrate actions across agri-food systems, biodiversity, and climate change response. Civil society organisations met with the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee (PC) on Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development in March 2023 to share views on agroecology.<sup>1</sup> The Chair of the PC requested more information on possible reasons why an earlier draft agroecology strategy and other draft policies in the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) have stalled, and where agroecology fits within existing policies and

framings. A report, which can be read **here**,<sup>2</sup> has been produced to assist in responding to that question.

The definition of agroecology used in the report is based on the 13 principles published in 2019 by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food and Nutrition (HLPE) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), under the auspices of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).<sup>3</sup> The principles are adapted to the South African context, in particular through the inclusion of tailored examples of good practices for each of the principles, and alignment with food sovereignty. The principles are integrated in practice, but for purposes of simplicity are arranged into three core elements, namely:

- Ecological sustainability
- Social justice and redress
- Economic justice and participation

1. Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2023. *Agroecology Strategy and Plan for South Africa: stakeholder input*. <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/36544/>
2. [https://tzm.io/agroeco\\_assess\\_report](https://tzm.io/agroeco_assess_report)
3. HLPE 2019. *Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition*. Report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/ca5602en/ca5602en.pdf>

The HLPE principles provide a more specific and detailed frame for analysis and action than other more generic concepts such as climate smart agriculture (core elements are productivity, mitigation of emissions, and adaptation practices) or nature-based solutions. These latter concepts are so broad that they open the way for corporate and elite capture and manipulation, as they have done.

## Policy context

South African policy on agriculture and food systems suffers from a split personality. This is a product of the historical compromises made in the negotiated end to formal apartheid, which resulted in the transfer of formal political power to the black majority while leaving the “commanding heights of the economy” under the control of an elite class within the white minority. In agriculture, this meant the continuation of the large-scale commercial agricultural model at the core of the agro-food system, and then efforts to transform the sector and increase black participation and ownership in the economy within the constraints imposed by the continuation of this model.

One set of laws and policies accommodates and regulates the inherited large-scale commercial farming and agribusiness model, with the 2022 Agriculture

and Agroprocessing Master Plan (AAMP) being the latest of these. Driven by agribusiness, with limited civil society input, and funded through public-private partnerships, these plans have been the actual agricultural policy as implemented. This is particularly important in input production and supply, and in trade. There is little if any room for mixed farming, integrated production, or localised food production and use. These policies effectively generate a “lock-in” to the use of conventional inputs and restrict the development of integrated ecological alternatives.

Another set of policy documents include smallholder support, local markets, ecological production, climate change adaptation, and biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, and are far more amenable to agroecological principles. Many of these policies were developed over the past 15 years, but remain in draft form and are either selectively implemented, or not implemented at all in any meaningful way. Despite some strong ecological components in smallholder farmer support policies, farmer support in practice still takes the form of subsidies to farmers for conventional inputs, including genetically modified and hybrid seed, synthetic fertilisers, toxic pesticides, and large, top-down projects that inevitably disintegrate over time as they are not appropriate to the needs of most smallholder producers. These dominant programmes squeeze out diversity and alternatives.

Ongoing institutional restructuring has been under way, following the merging of departments in 2019 to form the DALRRD, and plans to review





# Assessment of agroecological content of key South African policy documents

Overall, the assessment indicates that there are many areas of overlap in the existing suite of policy documents that can support an agroecological approach, but there is also a need to consolidate and integrate these elements into an overarching strategy. This can provide coherence, structure and orientation to a relatively disconnected but related suite of policies and implementation plans, as well as provide an effective integrating framework for agri-food systems, biodiversity and climate change response.

The analysis is based on a detailed review of 22 key policy documents, mainly in agriculture and environment but including others. The HLPE 13 principles are used as a framing device to assess the policies. Different agroecological principles are covered in different policies. A key point we are making is that agroecological principles can be found scattered throughout South Africa's policy documents. There is need for consolidation, but mostly the principles are already covered at least to some extent, and

departmental policies have created uncertainty on future direction. This is compounded by the political administration also being due for rotation in 2024. It is in this climate of policy uncertainty and contradiction that we have developed the assessment.

existing policies can be built on. At the minimum, this indicates that agroecology is not in opposition to the government's stated agenda. At best, agroecology can be used as a framing to integrate these elements.

The assessment finds that the principles of participation, land and natural resource governance, economic diversification, input reduction and biodiversity are strongly reflected across the reviewed suite of national policies and plans. Also fairly well represented are the principles of recycling, co-creation of knowledge, and social values (but not including social diets). Less well represented principles are soil health, synergy, fairness and connectivity. Weak points are social diets (nutrition) and animal health.

Five key policy documents that more comprehensively promote a number of principles of agroecology are identified. These are:

- Agriculture Sector Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Plan draft 2015
- National Policy on Comprehensive Producer Development Support draft 2019
- Conservation Agriculture Policy draft 2022
- White Paper on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity draft 2022
- Just Transition Framework 2022

However, no single policy or small group of generally supportive policies are sufficient on their own to be used as a proxy for an agroecology strategy, or to provide the integrating function that agroecology can. The assessment clearly shows that there are

multiple elements of agroecology across many policies. But in practice, there is continued support for conventional inputs and processes, especially through input subsidies in the farmer support programmes. Extension and training services remain focused on conventional agriculture. To build resilience and sustainability in the food system requires deliberate interventions to shift this state of affairs, including provision of more systematic support for integrating approaches like agroecology.

## Pathways forward

- Use of an agroecology framing can integrate policy, planning and action across agri-food systems, biodiversity and climate change response
- Develop an agroecology strategy that integrates elements of agri-food systems, biodiversity and climate change response plans and actions across departments and programmes
- Pilot multi-actor, place-based initiatives for integrated approaches and support
- Review the existing suite of commercial laws and policies, in particular to remove the obstacles to producers expanding their agroecological practices

Please click [here](#) to read the full report.