JustTransitions

FACT SHEET 01

Towards a just transition in South Africa's food system

What is a **just transition?**

The principle of a just transition in South Africa emerged from the labour movement. As ecologically damaging industries are shifted to more sustainable practices, workers and other vulnerable groups in those industries should not be the ones to carry the risks and pay the price. Workers must have a central voice in the transition, which must actively benefit workers and communities. A just transition, therefore, refers to shifting ecologically harmful economic activities towards sustainable practices and processes. This must happen in ways that are socially inclusive and equitable, and centre the needs of workers and communities.

Simply greening industries and protecting jobs will not realise a just society, and will leave existing exploitative relations in place. We have to focus on deeper changes to realise the objectives of a just transition.

Why do we need a just transition in the **food system?**

Deep social injustice and inequality

- **Land and agrarian inequality:** Historical land dispossession of the Black majority, together with lack of land and agrarian reform post-1994, means a few thousand large-scale commercial farmers hold most productive land and produce the bulk of our food. Millions of smallholders lack secure access to land, proper support, or markets. Women smallholders are particularly marginalised from accessing resources.
- **Corporate power:** A few large corporations control commercial inputs to farming, and dominate in food processing, distribution, and retail markets. They make huge profits from production and the sale of food, which is meant to be a basic human right. About 600 000 informal traders (majority women) play an important role in distributing food, particularly for working-class households, but their needs are marginalised in policy, in government support for their activities, and at municipal level.
- **Hunger and food insecurity:** Through dispossession the majority of the population was made dependent on the corporate food system. But while big business profits from this dependency, up to a quarter of households consistently experience food insecurity. Sharp food price inflation makes this worse.
- **Gendered burden:** The effects of land and agrarian inequality, corporate power, and food insecurity fall hardest on the shoulders of Black, working-class women, who are generally most directly responsible for feeding families amidst unjust circumstances.
- **Precarious and low wage labour:** A consistent trend across farming and food processing and retail has been a move away from secure employment, towards increased informal, casual, and temporary labour. Workers experience low and stagnant wages. Few farm workers are paid anything more than the minimum wage, which is not enough to even cover a minimum recommended nutritional diet for a family, let alone other costs as well. Farm workers still lack security of tenure, and continue to be evicted. Workers do not experience equitable livelihoods in the food system.

The food system is deeply vulnerable to climate change impacts

(See Fact sheet 4 for more detail on this topic.)

The production of food in South Africa is very vulnerable to climate change impacts. Without adaptation measures to make people and the whole system more resilient, production will decrease in many regions and sectors, resulting in rising food prices and hunger. A more environmentally resilient system is urgently needed.

The food system is a significant contributor to climate change

(See Fact Sheet 3 for more detail on this topic.)

The industrial food system, which is based on industrial, factory-like production, is a major contributor to climate change. It contributes about 18% of South Africa's greenhouse gas emissions. It also leads to water pollution and biodiversity destruction, through monoculture and the heavy use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. Industrial agriculture is at war with nature. How food is produced, distributed, and prepared should be changed in order to reduce emissions.

What should a **food system just transition** achieve?

Within a vision of food sovereignty, three broad, inter-related targets can indicate the achievement of a just transition:

1. **Equitable livelihoods** – A just transition must achieve decent jobs and incomes for working people. Profits and the market should not drive the food system. In the current system, only a few profit, while the majority in the food system (such as consumers, workers and informal traders) struggle. Policy and actions should be implemented that transform the food system in the direction of food sovereignty, to achieve a more equal distribution of roles and benefits to those involved in the food system. This should also be motivated by gender justice. Workers employed in food system enterprises should have job security, safe working conditions, the right and ability to organise, and earn wages that allow them and their families to live a decent life. Through land reform, smallholder farmers should have secure rights to land, markets, and support for agroecological production. Informal traders should be recognised as key players in the food system, and consequent efforts made to ensure they earn decent incomes from their work.
2. **Environmental sustainability** – Food should be produced, distributed, and consumed through agroecology so as to work with nature and minimise greenhouse gas emissions. Food production should work with nature and improve natural functions. This will increase the resilience of food and ecological systems, strengthen adaptation capacity, enhance biodiversity, and contribute to landscape restoration.
3. **Right to food and improved nutrition** –The food system can and should produce a wide diversity of nutritious foods, which are accessible for all. Measures to ensure the right to food and improved nutrition will be a key route to the just transition realising food sovereignty.

Reduction of emissions from food systems is needed. But adaptation measures will also be needed to ensure ecological sustainability and resilience, decent work and equitable livelihoods, and the Right to Food and improved nutrition. Adaptation refers to practical measures that can build resilience amongst people and in the food system. In farming, agroecological practices are also adaptive practices. Many such practices can be carried out by producers without major interventions. But technical support will be needed that affirms and builds on their knowledge. Deeper economic, social and political changes will also be needed, in policy, systems and processes.

Barriers to a just transition in the South African **food system**

There are barriers to realising a just transition. These include:

- **Discourse and policy bias** – Much of the public and policy agenda on just transition has focused on energy. But food systems transformation is equally important, given the industrial food system's environmental implications and the centrality of food and nutrition to any society. However, government has prioritised the role of the market in organising the food system since the passing of the Marketing of Agricultural Products Act (1996). This strengthened the role of private actors in shaping the food system. There is therefore a need to build a strong public agenda around food sovereignty and the just transition.
- **Corporate power** – Corporations and financial institutions have a lot of power in shaping the food system. Profit-oriented strategies are maintained at the expense of social and environmental justice. This is why workers in the food system are exploited, precarious, and low paid. Corporations shape what consumers choose and eat. Corporations have strong influence in policy making.
- **Lack of land and agrarian reform** – Leaves existing relations of power intact, reinforces concentration of ownership and control, and leaves rural dwellers and food producers without secure tenure.
- **Disjointed government policy related to the food system** – Many policies relate to the food system, but they do not always relate to one another, and there are contradictions between them. There is no overall food system perspective, and Departments do not work well together.
- **Path dependency** – Practices, policies, markets, institutions, companies, education and training, and imaginations 'lock in' the role of the industrial food system and corporate players.
- **"Green transition" pathways leave existing inequalities intact, or reinforce them** – There is the threat that producers, processors, and companies in the food system, and government, respond to sustainability challenges in ways that focus only on sustaining production or profit. As a result they may not consider wider questions of justice, inequality, power, or deeper approaches to sustainability. This will leave existing inequalities unaddressed, which will likely be worsened by direct and indirect climate change impacts.

Because of these obstacles, including the possibility that dominant actors in the food system will respond to the sustainability challenge in ways that are not guided by the interests of our constituencies, we need to ensure that any mitigation and adaptation pathways are just. How do we decide if they are just?

How do we get from **where we are now** to achieving a just transition in the food system?

Principles and indicators

It is important for us to consider what our constituencies' priorities for change in the food system are, and how this is reflected in our understanding of justice. These can be broken down into a set of principles and indicators for justice, which should be reflected in policies, programmes, and projects for a more sustainable food system.

Table 1 proposes a set of principles that can define a just transition in the food system. The principles provide 'rules' of justice that should be enacted in a transition. Indicators showing that the principles have been applied practically in the food system need to be considered. Achieving these indicators will ensure the principles are realised. These can form the basis for assessing whether situations, actions, and policies are just or unjust.

Table 1: Principles and indicators for a just transition in the food system

Principle	Indicators
Meet human needs Labour justice	- Decent work: fair payment and working conditions throughout the food system - Improved quality of life for workers
Just food-chain structures	- Fair and mutually agreeable relationships between food system actors - Fair food value chains that create green decent jobs
Right to vital goods (e.g. right to food, land, water)	- Access for all to sufficient nutritious, adequate, and safe food at all times - Resilience of food supply chains to shocks - Supporting farmer resilience in the face of shocks and stresses
Livelihood opportunities	- Improved farmer livelihoods and quality of life - Workers and farmers own and have secure access to the land they work, especially women - Smaller and non-corporate actors in food supply chains are recognised and supported
Ecological integrity	- Ecosystem health is improved – agroecology - Biodiversity restoration, conservation and expansion - Soil, water, and air health is protected and improved - Natural resource use stays within planetary boundaries - Animals are treated respectfully, and their inherent value is recognised
Participatory and democratic Just and participatory processes	- Decision making processes are transparent, inclusive, and provide fair opportunity for hearing different voices - Decision making does not simply reflect, create, or intensify power disparities
Access to relevant information	- Reliable information about the impacts of food systems, climate change, and different diets on humans and nature is available to all in decision making and action
Respect and be inclusive of diversity	- Local, indigenous, and traditional knowledge is respected and given a voice - Diverse visions related to producing, processing, and preparing food are respected - Specific effort is made for gender, class, and race inclusion, and everyone is equally recognised and valued
Capacity building	- Developing individual and collective skills for just transition - Capacity building for collective action on just transitions - Appropriate technical and technological innovations are made available to relevant actors, especially marginalised groups

Adapted from Tribaldos, T. and T. Kortetmäki. 2022. 'Just transition principles and criteria for food systems and beyond', *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 43, pg 248.

Possible discussion question for the table:

- Identify the indicators most relevant to your constituency. Do any more need to be added?
- What measures/actions need to be undertaken in order to realise the indicators? By whom?
- You may want to reproduce the table above, and add a third column 'Measures/actions' for you to fill in.