JustTransitions

FACT SHEET 02

The South African food system and the need for a just transition

What is the **food system**

The food system refers to all the elements and activities related to producing and consuming food, and their effects, including economic, health, and environmental outcomes.

The production and distribution system (Figure 1) includes agricultural inputs, agricultural production, agroprocessing and food manufacturing, formal and informal trade, consumption, and transport and storage. Governance (the way the food system is managed and how wealth that is created in the food system is distributed between actors) is also part of the whole system.

The **production and distribution system** is shaped by, but also contributes to shaping, the socio-economic and environmental contexts. The socio-economic context includes markets, policy, science and technology, education and training, social organisation, and individual factors. The environmental context includes fossil fuel use, climate, water, biodiversity, minerals and land.

The production and distribution system and the surrounding context have both positive and negative results. In the industrial food system, negative impacts are piling up and producing an unsustainable system.

Food system **outcomes: current** and **future**

Socio-economic outcomes

Current

There are many livelihoods in the South African food system especially in agricultural production, transport, distribution, and food service (restaurants, takeaways etc.) but these are restricted by the concentrated character of the food system, and by government policies that favour the corporate sector.

Food production is geared for export markets before resolving domestic food security. The

theory is that exports generate foreign currency which allows South Africa to import cheaper food. But the money goes into private pockets. Scarce water and soil embedded in products is exported.

Policies entrench large-scale commercial agriculture and restrict smallholder producers, especially those practicing agroecology.

Poor and insecure working conditions characterise agricultural and food production, especially for farm workers.

Profiteering from food production and distribution is rife.

Concentrated ownership and control characterise the South African food system, especially agricultural inputs, grain storage, cattle feedlots, food manufacturing, and formal retail. Large companies have been sold to buyers outside the country, and financial institutions control the formal system.

Future

A just transition will include redistribution of resources including land, democratic and participatory processes, distributed economic ownership, decent working conditions and security, and policies to support agroecology.

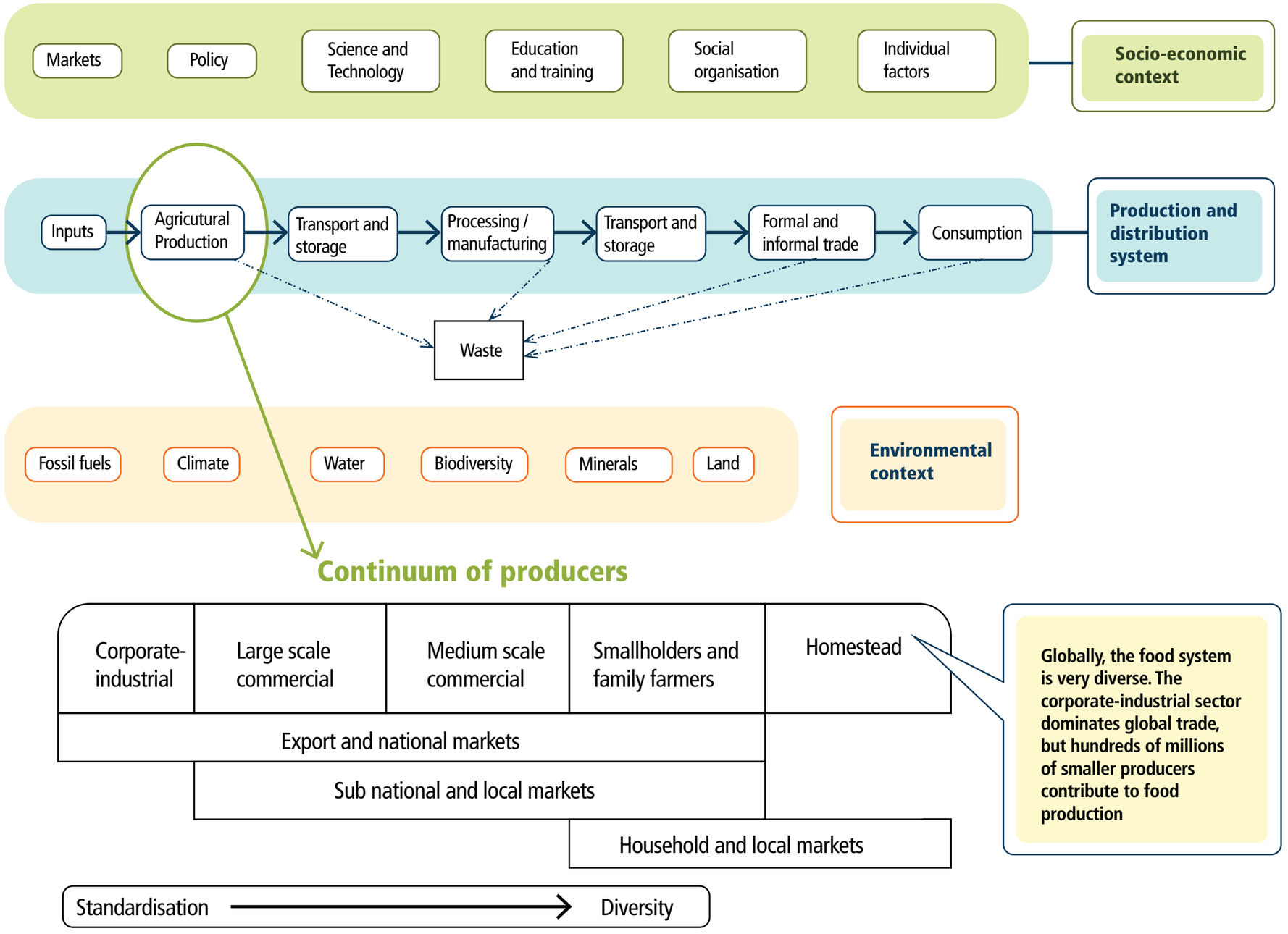
Food security

Current

Markets determine food access. Along with unemployment and low wages, this leads to high levels of food insecurity despite productive capacity. In South Africa, at least one out of every five households is regularly food insecure. Black women, and inhabitants of rural and informal settlements are hardest hit.

Sharp increases in food prices are characteristic of the current food system. Global supply issues cause delays and restrictions. There are multiple threats to agricultural production, including a "cost-price" squeeze, where input costs rise faster than output costs and farmers are squeezed between the two. Corporate retailers, manufacturers and input suppliers increase their profits by using their power to shape what farmers produce.

Figure 1: The food system



The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has forced markets open. Even if there is no need for imports, participating countries must allow free access for certain volumes. This results in the import of subsidised, cheap food, often of poor nutritional quality. Subsidies in other countries artificially reduce the costs of production, which undermines domestic production in South Africa by forcing local producers to compete with artificially low prices. Countries end up relying more on imports. This produces a downward cycle of destruction of local capacity, and dependency on others to produce our food for us when we could do it ourselves.

The South African food system has produced malnutrition (obesity, diabetes, and hunger side by side). The cheapest food has the poorest nutritional quality. Industrial processing reduces per unit costs, but reduces the nutritional value of food (for example highly processed maize meal, and sugar). Diets are high in carbohydrates, with unbalanced meals. Those with few resources have limited access to proteins, and a lack of dietary diversity.

Future

A transformed system should place the right to food at the centre of the objectives of the food system. Food is a public good, and the right to food means everyone has access to the food they need every day, regardless of whether they can afford to buy or not. A future system will include a universal basic income grant, dietary diversity and nutrition, and expansion of community-level and smallholder agroecological food production and distribution.

Environmental

Current

Large-scale commercial production generates significant environmental damage. Some of this is even recognised by commercial agriculture, for example, excessive water use, and toxic chemicals which damage water, land, soil and biodiversity. Other environmental damage is less recognised, such as greenhouse gas emissions from the food system, and wider ecosystem damage. Agriculture is also highly vulnerable to climate change impacts because it is so dependent on the weather.

Small-scale and communal farmers have a comparatively limited ecological footprint. But there is a lack of support for environmentally friendly practices.

Waste creates environmental problems.

Future

Agroecology responds to all dimensions of the food system, by embracing ecological and sustainable production practices, and progressive social and economic transformation. It is an integrated response to climate change, biodiversity loss, soil and water pollution and degradation. It aims for zero waste through recycling and a circular economy.