

How Civil Society Can Act to Ensure Sector Adaptation Plans Support a Climate Just Food System

In brief

- Section 22 of the Climate Change Act requires government departments to develop a Sector Adaptation Strategy and Plan (SASP). Civil society (including labour) can act to ensure these support a climate just and resilient food system.
- SASPs must assess climate risks and vulnerabilities, identify affected communities, and set out adaptation measures and steps.
- Past government sector adaptation plans have been too narrow, focusing on technical climate responses while neglecting the needs of workers, communities, and wider food system actors.
- Sector adaptation plans are critical for a just transition in the food system because food-system challenges cut across sectors and require coordinated, integrated government responses.

Civil society must take advantage of the provisions of the Climate Change Act to hold departments accountable for developing SASPs that reflect grounded food system priorities and support a just transition.

The Climate Change Act's adaptation plan

The Climate Change Act 2024 is South Africa's first legally binding framework for climate action. It sets out how government must reduce emissions, adapt to climate impacts, and coordinate climate action, by mandating national, provincial, local and sector-level climate response plans. Though long overdue, given the urgency of the crisis, the Act has nonetheless been welcomed by climate justice advocates as a key tool for enabling stronger climate action and a progressive and just transition.¹ The Act creates important opportunities for civil society to engage and push for meaningful adaptation measures through upcoming policies, strategies and plans across government.

The previous factsheet in this series provided an overview of the Act and its key mandates². This factsheet provides an explanation of Sector Adaptation and Strategy Plans (SASPs), and the importance of engaging with them to ensure their content supports a just transition agenda in the food system.

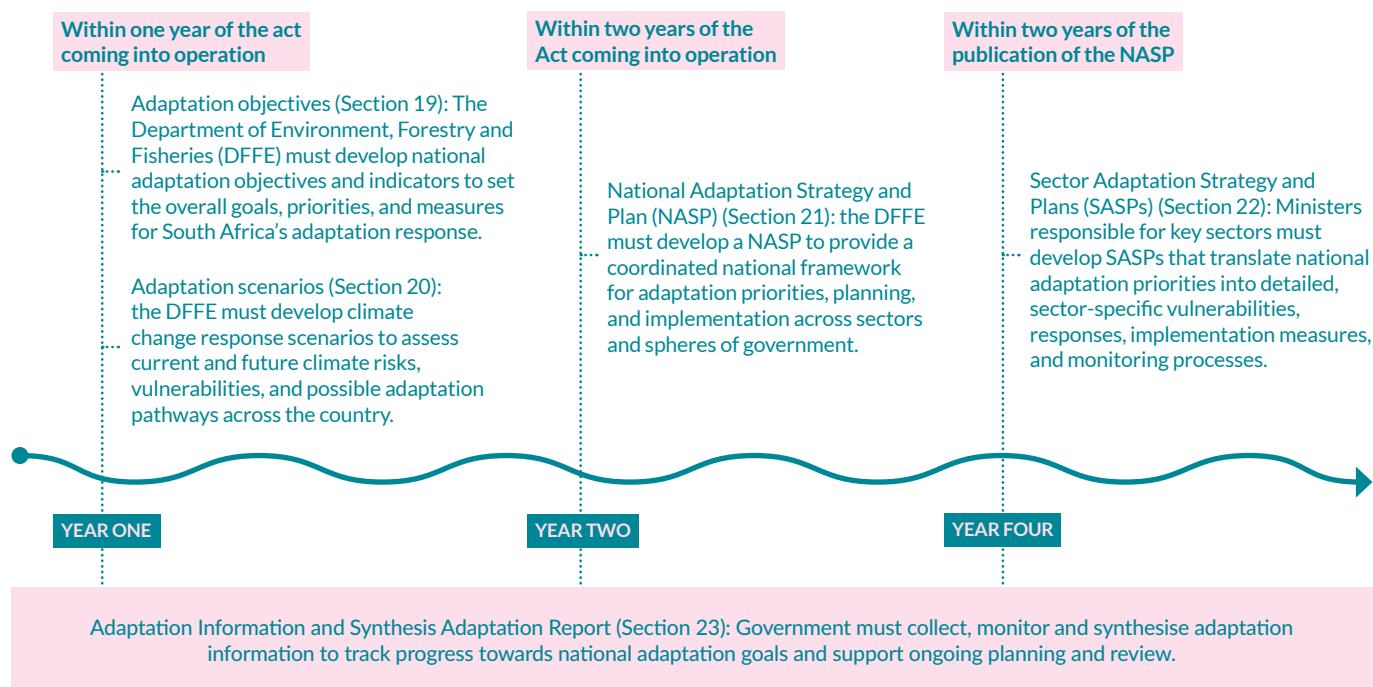
The Act recognises adaptation (see Box 1) as a central and urgent component of South Africa's response to climate change, requiring coordinated planning and implementation across different sectors and spheres of government. **Under Chapter 4 of the Climate Change Act, the following adaptation measures are mandated:**

This factsheet focuses on what SASPs are, who is responsible for them, and how civil society can use them to advance a progressive and just food systems agenda.



BOX 1: CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Adaptation refers to adjustments in systems, infrastructure, institutions and practices to reduce harm from climate impacts and respond to changing environmental conditions. Mitigation, on the other hand, refers to reducing greenhouse gas emissions or increasing the absorption of emissions.



What are the Sector Adaptation and Strategy Plans (SASPs)

The SASP is outlined under Section 22 of the Act and aims to translate climate adaptation into practical action within specific sectors that fall under government departments, such as agriculture.

The Act states that each Minister responsible for a sector listed in Schedule 2 of the Act (see Box 2) must develop and implement a SASP for each sector that falls within their department within two years of the publication of the NASP. The plans are usually drafted by dedicated directorates within departments, before being approved and adopted by the relevant Minister.

This places responsibility directly on national departments and makes adaptation a formal part of sectoral governance and planning. The plans are therefore not intended to sit separately from government decision-making, but rather to shape how departments plan, budget, regulate, and respond to climate risks over time.

The Act does not prescribe a rigid structure for SASPs but indicates that each SASP should, for its sector:

- ✓ **Assess climate risks and vulnerabilities** linked to the functions of the relevant department.
- ✓ **Identify the areas, ecosystems and communities** that are vulnerable to climate change.

- ✓ **Determine the adaptation measures and mechanisms** needed to respond to those risks and vulnerabilities.
- ✓ **Align the adaptation response** with the National Adaptation Strategy and Plan.
- ✓ **Set out** how the identified adaptation measures will be implemented within the sector.
- ✓ **Review and report on progress on implementation of the plan at least every five years** and update it based on monitoring and evaluation results, technological developments, the best available science and evidence, and South Africa's international commitments.

BOX 2: SECTORS THAT UNDER SCHEDULE 2 ARE MANDATED TO DEVELOP A SASP

- Agriculture
- Education
- Cooperative Governance
- Forestry
- Fisheries
- Disaster Risk Reduction
- Energy
- Environment Health
- Human Settlements
- Manufacturing
- Public Enterprises
- Rural Development
- Land Reform
- Science
- Technology
- Tourism
- Traditional Affairs
- Transport
- Water Affairs
- Sanitation

How to advance justice in the food system using the SASPs

Civil society must engage with multiple SASPs to push for a just and resilient food system. Section 32 of the Climate Change Act requires relevant ministers to open up SASPs for public comment, objections and meaningful participation. If this process is carried out effectively, it creates a critical entry point for civil society to shape adaptation planning. However, this requires preparation and organisation. Civil society can use this process to scrutinise how each sector defines climate risk, whose vulnerabilities are recognised, and whether proposed responses address the realities of those most affected by climate change. It is also a space to push for concrete measures that advance food justice, protect livelihoods, and strengthen public accountability.

Sector plans are key to building effective climate responses across complex systems like the food system. In terms of a food system just transition, the most obvious sector adaptation plan to focus on is the agricultural sector. However, at the same time climate action for food justice is often reduced to the sole responsibility of the Department of Agriculture. A food systems lens shows that climate risks are shaped across many interconnected sectors, including water, land, health, disaster management, transport, trade, and more.

For example droughts and floods affect:

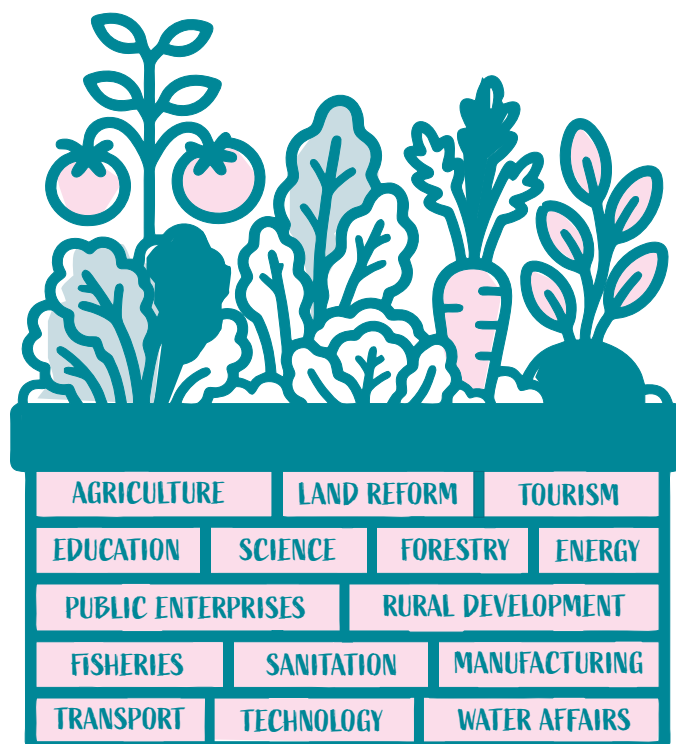
- Farmers and food production by impacting harvests (Agriculture)
- Water availability for irrigation (Water and Sanitation)
- Transport and distribution routes (Transport)
- Farm workers' wages, health and safety (Employment and Labour)
- Informal traders' ability to access and sell food (Small Business Development and local governments). This means that food system adaptation cannot sit within one department or level of government. It requires coordinated responses across multiple areas of government.

Civil society can use the provisions for public participation in the Act to scrutinise how each sector defines climate risk, whose vulnerabilities are recognised, and whether proposed responses reflect the realities of those most affected. The Act can be used to push for concrete measures that advance a just transition. The Just Transition and Food Systems network, a loose coalition of community-based organisations, NGOs, labour, smallholder farmers, and academics, is already working to identify key positions and demands that can be advanced through these processes. This work will feed into a forthcoming position paper, which aims to consolidate civil society priorities for climate adaptation and food system justice in the SASPs.

Existing sectoral climate plans do not fully reflect civil so-

ciety needs. As new SASPs are developed, civil society must ensure that the priorities of workers, women, small-scale producers, informal traders, and affected communities are placed at the centre.

For example, the Department of Agriculture's existing Agriculture Sector Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Plan (CCAMP), that now requires revision under the Climate Change Act. It identifies key climate risks facing agriculture and proposes responses such as conservation agriculture, water harvesting, crop diversification, integrated crop-live-stock systems, and early warning measures. However, it also has some biases like narrow emphases on productivity, competitiveness, and prioritisation of large-scale commercial agriculture for adaptation. Civil society should use the Act's process to push the Department beyond narrow responses towards agroecology, land redistribution, local food systems, support to smaller producers, farm workers, and structural inequalities - a vision informed by food sovereignty.



Climate risk doesn't departmentalise, so neither can our response. Cross-sectoral risks demand cross-sectoral accountability, with joint mandates and shared metrics across every department that shapes our food system.

For a comprehensive food systems approach, the relevant sector adaptation plans need to align and speak to each other. For example, with water planning, the Department of Water and Sanitation's 2024 Climate Change Response Strategy recognises that climate change is worsening South Africa's water insecurity, sanitation failures and infrastructure challenges, and that these impacts are unevenly felt. However, it could go further. While it notes agriculture's high water use and water-energy-food linkages, it does not fully unpack how water insecurity affects food production, prices, livelihoods and household food access.

A stronger water SASP should prioritise equitable water access for small-scale producers, support local food systems, restore catchments in ways that sustain livelihoods, and coordinate with food system actors, including agriculture, labour, producers and affected communities.

Similar questions should be asked across all relevant sectors: how does this plan affect livelihoods, food prices, access to nutritious food and the communities most exposed to climate risk? For civil society, the task is to push for a coherent, cross-sectoral adaptation agenda that places justice, redistribution, and accountability at the centre of South Africa's food system climate response.



The key is in your hands to have your say in how governments apply the Climate Change Act.



A Call To Action

The Climate Change Act creates an important opportunity to shape how South Africa responds to the climate crisis. Its real significance lies in the processes it sets in motion.

For the food system, these processes are critical.

A just and resilient food system requires coordinated, cross-sectoral planning across government. Civil society can use public participation processes to challenge narrow, top-down responses, and to put forward grounded alternatives shaped by the realities of informal traders, small-scale producers, farm workers, subsistence farmers, fishers, and low-income households.

This includes demanding that sector plans are properly funded, implemented, monitored and coordinated across departments. Without this pressure, SASPs risk becoming fragmented plans that reproduce existing inequalities. With sustained engagement, they can become tools for advancing a just transition in the food system.

For more information and to receive updates, email Yasirah.Madhi@iej.org.za. You can also contact the Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and Environment (DFFE) at NCCSecretariat@dffe.gov.za.

Endnotes

- 1 Centre for Environmental Rights (CER). 2024. [Civil society organisations welcome imminent promulgation of the Climate Change Act: A crucial step towards a meaningful response to climate change](#). 30 April. (Accessed on: 22 June 2026).
- 2 Madhi, Y., and Bennie, A. 2025. [Using the Climate Change Act to shape a more just and resilient food system in South Africa](#). Johannesburg: Institute for Economic Justice. (Accessed on: 22 June 2026).
- 3 The NASP was mandated to be published 2 years after the Act was promulgated. While 2 year marks nears it is looking unlikely that these timelines will be met for the NASP, let alone the subsequent SASP