



Position Paper

Putting food systems on the climate agenda

Producer, worker, and community
priorities for Adaptation Plans under
the Climate Change Act



Institute for Economic Justice

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Executive Summary

South Africa's food system faces high levels of food insecurity, unequal access to resources, precarious work and ecological degradation. Climate change is worsening these pressures through droughts, floods, extreme heat, changing fish stocks, production losses, disrupted supply chains and rising food prices. The greatest impacts fall on workers, small-scale producers, fishers, informal traders, women, people with disabilities and resource-poor households.

The Climate Change Act creates an opportunity to address these challenges through coordinated national, sectoral, provincial and municipal adaptation planning. Effective adaptation must extend beyond technical agricultural measures and address the underlying conditions that increase vulnerability across the food system.

This position paper draws on a long-term process of capacity building and consultation with food-system constituencies to identify the principles and priorities that should shape these plans.

Guiding principles

The guiding principles provide a shared foundation for adaptation planning across sectors, departments and spheres of government. They reflect the values that food-system constituencies believe should shape how priorities are set, resources are allocated and adaptation measures are designed and implemented.

- 01 **Right to food and food sovereignty:** Ensure reliable access to sufficient nutritious, healthy, diverse, and culturally appropriate food, while strengthening community control over food systems.
- 02 **Redistribution:** Expand equitable access to land, water, seed, income and productive resources, including through a universal basic income grant.
- 03 **Environmental protection:** Restore ecosystems, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support ecologically sustainable production.
- 04 **Gender and intersectional justice:** Address unequal climate risks, access to resources, and barriers to adaptation arising from gender, disability, age, socio-economic status, race, and location.
- 05 **Participation and knowledge co-production:** Centre affected constituencies and local knowledge in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- 06 **Effective government action:** Strengthen coordination, municipal capacity, funding, and accountability.

Priority areas for action

The priority action areas identify where adaptation plans can respond most directly to the concerns raised by food-system constituencies. They set out practical interventions to protect livelihoods, strengthen resilience and improve food access across national, sectoral, provincial and municipal planning.

- 01 **Protect and improve working conditions** through stronger labour enforcement, workplace climate-risk assessments, occupational health and safety measures, and safe, serviced workplaces and trading spaces.
- 02 **Safeguard livelihoods and extend social protection** through income protection, living wages, improved public services, climate-ready healthcare, skills development, decent work, and a universal basic income grant.
- 03 **Provide effective disaster relief and recovery** that rapidly restores incomes, assets, infrastructure and livelihoods, supported by clear responsibilities, funding, and accessible early-warning systems.
- 04 **Build resilient food production and distribution systems** through land and water redistribution, agroecology, support for small-scale fishers, local markets and appropriate infrastructure.
- 05 **Make nutritious food affordable** through food-price controls, public food reserves, local procurement and stronger regulation of corporate market power.

More detailed measures must be developed with affected constituencies and tailored to different sectors, provinces and municipalities. These principles and priorities can guide this wider process towards a just, participatory and climate-resilient food system.

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List of acronyms

CCAMP	Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Plan
CPDSP	Comprehensive Producer Development Support Policy
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DFFE	Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
DoA	Department of Agriculture
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
ITPGRFA	International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MtCO ₂ -eq	Million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent
NAFSA	National Agroecology Framework for South Africa
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
NFNSP	National Food and Nutrition Security Plan
NRM	Natural Resource Management
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Section 1: Background and context

This position paper aims to shape the implementation of the Act by setting out the priorities of food-system constituencies and identifying the measures that should be incorporated into sectoral, provincial and municipal adaptation plans. In the first section, we set out the climate and policy context for the paper, describe the structural inequalities that shape South Africa's food system, identify the process of the paper's production, and summarise the lived experiences of affected constituencies. Together, these elements explain why adaptation planning must extend beyond technical agricultural measures.

1.1 Policy, context, and purpose

South Africa's food system has a dual relationship with climate change: it contributes heavily to the crisis while becoming increasingly vulnerable to its effects (Bennie et al., 2023). The food system accounts for almost a third of the country's greenhouse gas emissions, driven by highly industrialised agriculture, the use of heavy machinery and synthetic fertilisers, land-use change, and livestock production, amongst others. At the same time, the impacts of the climate crisis, such as droughts and floods, disrupt production and supply chains. These impacts are unevenly distributed, deepening existing vulnerabilities within the food system, and are often felt by the most marginalised actors in the systems.

The government has increasingly recognised the severity of the climate crisis through numerous policies and strategies, culminating in the Climate Change Act, which came into operation in March 2025. The Act establishes a legally binding framework for coordinating South Africa's response to climate change across all spheres of government. It requires national sectors/departments, provinces, and municipalities to assess climate risks, integrate climate considerations into their planning, and develop measures to strengthen adaptation and resilience.

The Act is particularly important for the food system, whose adaptation needs extend far beyond the agriculture sector. Food production, distribution, and access are shaped by decisions relating to land, water, labour, health, transport, trade, human settlements, disaster management, and local government. Effective food-system adaptation therefore requires coordinated planning across several departments and spheres of government, rather than isolated departmental interventions. The Act creates an important opportunity to ensure that food-system concerns are addressed in a more connected and comprehensive way.

This paper is intended to assist policymakers in formulating approaches to climate adaptation planning through the national, agricultural, selected sectoral, and local government adaptation plans mandated by the Climate Change Act. It reflects community-based perspectives grounded in lived experience and sectoral expertise, generated through participatory dialogue and collective deliberation since 2023.

1.2 South African food system inequalities and outcomes

South Africa's food system combines high productive capacity with unequal social, economic, and environmental outcomes. It is productive, generating a wide range of food products. However, outcomes fall short socially, economically and environmentally. Despite its technical sophistication and global competitiveness, the commercial food system has not realised the constitutional right to sufficient food for a significant proportion of the population. The 2023 National Food and Nutrition Survey found that 63.5% of households in South

Africa are food insecure. Of these, 70% are moderately or severely food insecure (Simelane et al., 2023). High levels of food insecurity and hunger coexist with concentrated corporate ownership, precarious labour conditions, and severe ecological degradation. These patterns reflect entrenched inequality in the food system. Smallholder farmers, small-scale fishers, informal sector workers, working-class women, and consumers remain marginalised, as low wages and insecure work underpin commercial profitability. Environmental outcomes are equally concerning, with the food system being the second largest source of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in South Africa after energy (Greenberg, 2024), while industrial food production practices contribute to significant land degradation, water pollution, and biodiversity loss.

1.3 The just transition in the food system network

In 2023, the Just Transition in the Food System network of civil society organisations (CSOs) initiated a national dialogue on a just transition in the South African agri-food system, focusing on the anticipated impacts of climate change on the food system and on generating and consolidating proposed responses from civil society. The initiative brought together diverse constituencies, including farm and food sector workers and trade unions, informal traders, waste pickers, smallholder farmers, small-scale fishers, advocacy groups, community-based organisations, and academics, with an emphasis on women's participation and gender representation.

This network continues to engage actively on priority issues including food prices, climate change impacts and responses, and agroecology. It is currently engaging with key policy processes such as the National Food and Nutrition Security Plan (NFNSP), the national food systems transformation pathways arising from the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, the Climate Change Act 22 of 2024 and its implementation processes, and the National Agroecology Framework for South Africa (NAFSA).

1.4 Grassroots experiences

Grassroots experiences shared by constituencies show that climate change is already intensifying existing inequalities and livelihood insecurity across the food system. In South Africa, this is characterised by increasing temperatures, prolonged dry spells, extreme weather events, and unseasonal and changing weather patterns. The resulting impacts, such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves, act as a threat and vulnerability multiplier, exacerbating existing risks, poor service delivery, and inequality. The situation is further exacerbated by commonplace practices such as deforestation, building in sensitive areas (including wetlands, riverbanks, mountain tops and coastal dunes), burning fields, littering, as well as water contamination and soil erosion from mining.

These result in losses and damage to production, life, and infrastructure, and, amid unequal adaptive capacity, contribute to rising hunger and food insecurity. These are some of those worst affected:

Women are disproportionately affected as their greater responsibility for food and water provisioning exposes them to the growing difficulty in meeting these needs, alongside increasing burdens of health and care work and heightened employment loss and precarity.

Small-scale farmers describe significant negative impacts on production. These include:

- **Animals:** heat stress and higher mortality, drowned livestock during floods, miscarriages among animals, loss of grazing lands, and wildlife entering gardens due to degraded and overgrazed rangelands.
- **Water:** boreholes drying up due to declining rainfall and falling water tables.
- **Soil:** drying soils, soil erosion, and saltwater intrusion in coastal areas, all resulting in loss of soil fertility.
- **Crops:** loss of and damage to crops, loss of indigenous species, the spread of invasive species, and declining crop yields.
- **Production and planning:** higher production costs, uncertainty in the planning of planting due to increasingly unpredictable weather and shifting seasons, new and increased incidence of pests and diseases including locusts and ticks, and loss or obsolescence of indigenous knowledge.

Small-scale fishers describe major changes in marine ecosystems, including stronger and shifting ocean currents, rising sea temperatures, changing fish migration patterns, declining species diversity, fewer safe ‘sea days’, shifting sandbanks, and fish moving further from traditional fishing grounds. These changes reduce access to fish and markets, contributing to unstable incomes.

Farmworkers, informal traders and rural households highlight the social and livelihood impacts of climate changes. These include disruptions to food availability, rising food prices, employment losses on farms, reduced working hours, and a growing reliance on short-term or contract labour on commercial farms. Women, in particular, describe increased burdens in securing food and water during droughts, as well as having to travel further or relocate temporarily in search of work. Workers’ resilience to climate impacts is undermined by existing decent work deficits, especially farm workers. Other adverse effects include: harsher working conditions and in particular extreme heat exposure on farms; rising incidence of illness; damage to homes, schools and water infrastructure; displacement following climate shocks and rural-urban migration; declining profitability; and reduction in the nutritional value of food. These pressures are particularly severe for people living with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

Taken together, these experiences show that climate change exacerbates existing vulnerabilities across the food system. Its effects are worsened by insecure and non-decent work, inadequate services, unequal access to resources, gendered responsibilities, disability, and weak livelihood protection. Effective adaptation must therefore address these underlying conditions rather than respond only to individual climate hazards.

The following section explains how these experiences and priorities were gathered and the analytical framework used to organise them.

Section 2: Methodology

The paper combines a participatory consultation process with a food-systems analytical framework.

2.1 Approach

The Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ)¹ led the network’s Climate Working Group in developing this position paper, which focuses on influencing aspects of the implementation of the Climate Change Act. The IEJ’s food systems team used a long-term, participatory, capacity-building approach to develop accessible factsheets (Madhi and Bennie, 2025) and hosted webinars on the Climate Change Act. The team convened workshops that brought together multiple food-system constituencies, alongside dedicated engagements with individual constituencies. Together, these activities built awareness of the Act, strengthened understanding of why constituencies need to engage with the policy processes it mandates, and supported the development of clear, collective demands through this position paper. So the paper was shaped through a long-term and deeply consultative process that brought policy analysis into conversation with the lived experiences, knowledge, and priorities of those most affected by climate change across the food system.

2.2 Analytical framework

This paper uses a food-systems approach to analyse climate risks and policy responses across production, processing, distribution, consumption, waste, and the wider social, economic, and ecological context. A food

¹ The [IEJ](#) is a progressive think tank that produces research and policy proposals to address inequality, advance socioeconomic rights, and support a just and sustainable economy.

system encompasses all the activities, actors, and relationships involved in producing, distributing, and consuming food (Ericksen et al., 2025). Figure 1 provides a framework for understanding this system.

Figure 1: A food systems framework

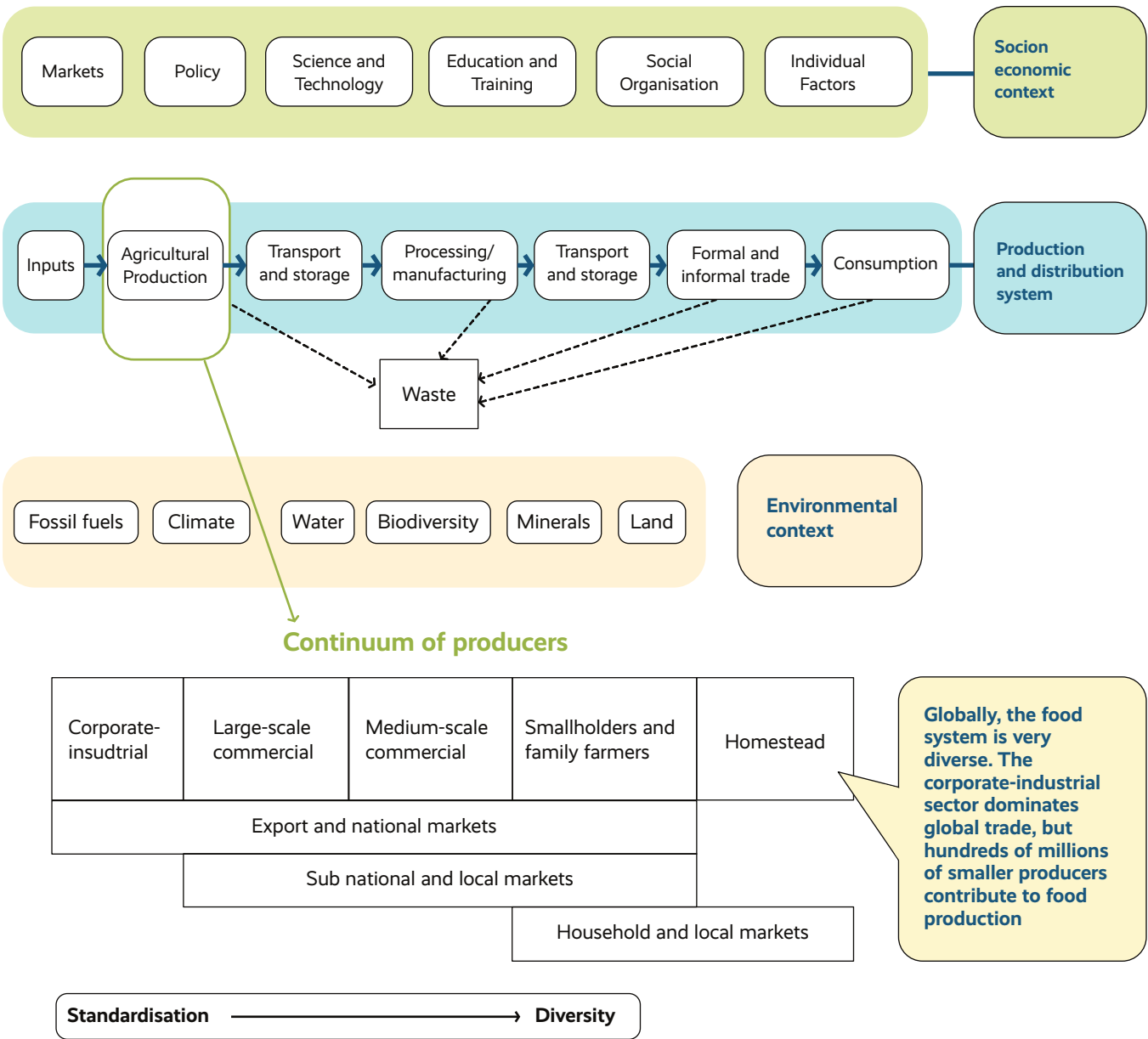


Figure 1 shows that food-system outcomes cannot be understood by examining agricultural production alone. At the functional core of the food system are the supply of agricultural inputs, cultivation, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management. At the production level, these activities involve a continuum of producers, ranging from subsistence and small-scale farmers to medium-scale and large commercial enterprises. These activities are embedded within a wider social, economic and environmental context, including gender relations and inequalities, which both shape and are shaped by the food system. This results in a complex, interconnected system requiring integrated approaches to achieve sustainability, resilience, and equitable socio-economic, food security, and environmental outcomes.

Adaptation in the food system cannot be limited to technical adjustments. Strengthening resilience requires structural transformation such as diversifying production, decentralising market power, securing livelihoods, and restoring ecological integrity. Without approaches like these addressing the underlying drivers of vulnerability, climate adaptation efforts will remain partial and uneven.

This analytical approach informs the principles set out in the following section, which define what a just and effective response to these structural vulnerabilities should entail.

Section 3: Guiding principles for just and effective climate adaptation

Developing effective adaptation plans requires a clear set of principles to maintain coherence across the different spheres of government responsible for implementing the Climate Change Act.

These principles should guide horizontal coordination across sectors and departments, as well as vertical alignment between national, provincial and municipal planning. This section sets out the principles that food-system constituencies identified as essential to ensuring that adaptation plans respond to their needs, reflect their experiences, and include those most affected by climate change. They provide a set of criteria against which to assess the specific interventions proposed in Section 4.

3.1 The right to food and food sovereignty

The right to food: the right to food should be the organising principle for food-system and climate interventions. By ‘the right to food’, we mean reliable access for all people, every day, to sufficient, nutritious, healthy, diverse and culturally appropriate food. Food is essential to life, dignity and public wellbeing and not a mere commodity. The right to food is recognised in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 11), and the South African Constitution (sections 27(1)(b) and 28(1)(c)); the latter section provides children with the specific right to basic nutrition. Both NAFSA and the draft NFNSP recognise the constitutional right to food and seek to advance it through stronger links between local production and consumption.

Food sovereignty: food sovereignty is essential to strengthening agency, autonomy and resilience within the food system. It requires communities, workers, and small-scale producers to have greater power and control over land, water, seed production, and local markets, while sustaining indigenous foods, traditional knowledge, and culturally appropriate practices.

NAFSA explicitly adopts food sovereignty as a framing concept and links it to ecological sustainability, local control, and social justice. It defines food sovereignty as: “The right of people, communities, and countries to define their own food systems, including policies on how food is produced, distributed, and consumed, based on culturally appropriate, ecologically sustainable, and locally controlled practices. It emphasises: i) the rights of small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples, and local communities to control land, seeds, water, and food production; ii) support for local food markets over global agribusiness; and iii) protection of traditional knowledge and food cultures. In essence, food sovereignty goes beyond food security by focusing not just on access to food, but on who controls the food system and how food is produced, with a strong emphasis on social justice, environmental sustainability, and local autonomy.”

Food systems approach - An integrated food-systems approach is necessary to realise the right to food and build climate resilience. This requires attention to the full system of production, processing, distribution, retail, consumption and waste, as well as the social, economic and ecological systems in which these activities take place. Effective intervention therefore depends on coordination across sectors and spheres of government.

3.2 Resource redistribution

Redistribution of resources and income are both essential to build climate resistance.

3.2.1 Redistribution of and secure access to natural resources

Accelerating land reform and expanding equitable access to land, water, and other productive resources, together with strengthening farmers' rights to seed and genetic resources, are essential to a just transition. They both ensure the availability of resources for wider food production and form the basis of a more diversified, resilient, and equitable food system.

3.2.2 Universal basic income grant

Income redistribution is essential to climate resilience; people without secure incomes cannot prepare for, withstand, or recover from climate shocks. South Africa faces structural unemployment, a decline in the traditional mining and manufacturing base without adequate replacement by other economic sectors, global political and economic instability, and the growing impacts of climate change. A universal basic income grant is a fundamental safety net to stabilise conditions for the majority of the population and contribute to resource redistribution. This should be set at a minimum of the upper-bound poverty line, with a degree of cross-subsidisation through the tax system.

3.3 Environmental protection for sustainability

Environmental protection is a necessary condition of effective adaptation; degraded land, water systems, biodiversity, and ecosystems reduce the food system's capacity to withstand climate shocks.

3.3.1 Input subsidy reform

Environmentally harmful subsidies should be phased out and support for the public redirected towards ecologically sustainable production. This has a strong policy basis in international, continental, and national frameworks, including Sustainable Development Goal 12, the Global Biodiversity Framework, the African Union's Africa Fertiliser and Soil Health Action Plan, the Comprehensive Producer Development Support Policy (CPDSP) and NAFSA. These frameworks support the reform of subsidies that encourage environmental harm and their redirection towards sustainable farming practices.

3.3.2 Planned transition away from harmful ecological practices in commercial agriculture

Adaptation plans should establish clear timelines and requirements for reducing pesticide use, restoring soil health, protecting water systems, lowering emissions, and shifting commercial agriculture towards agroecological and other less harmful production models. Workers and farmers have raised concerns about pesticide exposure, soil degradation, water insecurity, and industrial production. Adaptation in commercial agriculture must protect ecosystems, workers, and surrounding communities, rather than focus only on maintaining production and profitability.

3.3.3 Effective and sustainable natural resource management (NRM)

Sustainable management of land, water, biodiversity, oceans, and coastal ecosystems is essential to climate adaptation. Adaptation plans should strengthen protection against pollution, extractive activity, infrastructure failure, and ecological degradation, including oil and gas exploration, mining, sewage pollution, and plastic waste. South Africa's obligations under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Ramsar Convention, together with existing policies of the Department of Agriculture (DoA) and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), provide a strong basis for action.

3.3.4 Rapid shift to renewable energy

Long-term climate resilience depends on both adaptation and rapid mitigation. Mitigation must therefore remain central to adaptation planning, including through a rapid and just transition away from fossil fuels, and towards lower-emission food production and processing, and renewable-energy technologies that are appropriate and accessible to farmers, fishers and local communities. Government must implement and remain accountable to South Africa's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), including limiting annual GHG emissions to 350–420 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO₂-eq) by 2030 and 320–380 MtCO₂-eq by 2035 (Republic of South Africa, 2025). Without sustained emissions reductions, climate impacts will continue to intensify and progressively undermine the effectiveness of adaptation measures.

3.4 Gender and Intersectionality justice

Climate adaptation must address gender and intersectional inequalities because climate change impacts different groups unequally. Plans should consider from the outset how gender, together with disability, age, socio-economic status, race, and location, shapes people's exposure to climate risks, access to resources, and capacity to adapt. This requires adaptation plans to address women's unequal access to land, water, finance, decent work, public services, and decision-making, as well as the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and climate-related livelihood insecurity (Farr et al., 2025). Government's Gender-Responsive Planning, Budgeting, Monitoring, Evaluation and Auditing Framework supports this approach by requiring gender considerations to be integrated across public policies, plans, programmes, budgets and monitoring systems.

3.5 Participatory and democratic processes

3.5.1 Capacity building for climate action

Building community capacity for effective climate action requires meaningful and ongoing information sharing, education and training, consultation, and discussion, including in schools. It also requires timeous access to relevant information, use of diverse communications channels including radio, shared in easily understandable form and in local languages. Resources must be allocated for participation, which should start early, include preparation and feedback processes, and not only at punctuated points when drafts are opened for public consultation. Capacity building is needed across communities (with an emphasis on women, youth, and persons with disabilities), farmers, fishers, formal and informal workers, local government, and traditional authorities.

3.5.2 Grassroots and multi-actor collaborative planning, knowledge co-production and implementation

Planning and implementation is context specific. It should be inclusive and facilitate local prioritisation, local solutions, and local action and involvement. It is essential to recognise and incorporate local knowledge, since people know what the impacts are, and frequently have solutions too. Adaptation plans must be shaped by the constituencies most affected by climate change, including workers, small-scale farmers, fishers, informal traders, and resource-poor households. Current consultation processes are too top-down and often exclude the people with direct experience of climate impacts.

3.6 Effective government action

Effective adaptation depends not only on sound policy, but also on institutional coordination, adequate resources, measurable commitments, and accountability for implementation.

3.6.1 Monitoring and accountability

Government must make and adhere to specific commitments to act, with specific and measurable targets

established. Accountability and feedback mechanisms should be designed to ensure that communities know what is being done and can hold the government to account for failure to deliver on commitments. Effective implementation is critical and requires participation. A monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system should be developed to track implementation and assess results. Budgets should be decentralised for local implementation. Monitoring indicators are recommended, such as:

- **Participation:** percentage of women, youth, and persons with disabilities participating
- **Finance:** percentage of climate finance reaching organisations led by women and persons with disabilities
- **Livelihoods:** women and disabled farmers receiving extension support, and land distributed to vulnerable groups
- **Leadership:** women, marginalised groups, and persons with disabilities represented on adaptation committees.

3.6.2 Policy alignment and departmental coordination

Food-system adaptation requires coordination across departments, including agriculture, fisheries, labour, water, land, disaster management, local government, small business, and trade. Policies should be reviewed to eliminate or reduce contradictions and inconsistencies, and to ensure that they advance the right to food while building resilience and adaptive capacity in the food system. Within the DoA, key policies for integration/alignment are NAFSA, the NFNSP, and the CPDSP. Key DFFE plans for alignment include the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), the Second National Action Programme for South Africa to Combat Desertification, Land Degradation and the effects of Drought (2018-2030), and Policies for the Small-Scale Fisheries Sector.

3.6.3 Key role for local municipalities

Effective climate action will be driven by activated, informed people at local level, based on the local context, priorities and solutions. Local government has an essential role to play in facilitating and coordinating climate action, especially in service delivery, disaster relief, and building and maintaining resilient systems and infrastructure. The Climate Change Act mandates municipal and provincial plans; we must ensure that these are as effectively executed and resourced as national plans.

3.6.4 Conclusion

Taken together, these principles underlie an approach to adaptation planning that gives greater weight to social need, ecological limits, and the experiences of marginalised food-system constituencies. They recognise that decisions shaped mainly by economic and institutional power can reproduce existing inequalities and weaken efforts to build climate resilience, including access to a healthy environment, nutritious food, and essential public services. Using these principles can guide the development of stronger technical goals and shape the priorities, measures, and outcomes included in adaptation plans.

Section 4: Priority intervention areas for national and sector adaptation plans

Effective adaptation planning must ultimately result in clear priorities, concrete measures, and accountable action. Through the consultative process, food-system constituencies identified a set of tangible areas that require attention for adaptation planning.

These priorities reflect recurring concerns raised throughout the engagements and indicate where adaptation policy can more directly strengthen livelihoods, reduce vulnerability, and respond to the realities of those most

affected by climate change. These recommendations are intended to inform a range of adaptation planning processes, including national, sectoral, provincial, and municipal plans. Policymakers are encouraged to engage with them critically and identify which recommendations are most relevant and applicable to their specific mandates and planning processes.

4.1 Protect and improve working conditions in the food system

Objective: Address decent work deficits to ensure that workers throughout the food system are protected from instability caused by climate change and do not bear the costs of climate-related shocks. In this section, workers include wage workers, informal traders, farmers, and fishers.

4.1.1 Include the Department of Employment and Labour in adaptation planning and implementation

The Department of Employment and Labour is not currently mandated to develop a sector adaptation plan, but it must be formally included in the development, implementation, and monitoring of all adaptation plans that affect the food system.

Existing labour protections must be properly enforced, including occupational health and safety standards, the right to organise, equal pay for equal work, fair contracts, and the regulation of labour brokers. Proactive inspections and monitoring should be strengthened in climate-exposed sectors, rather than relying on workers to report violations after harm has occurred.

4.1.2 Strengthen occupational health and safety protections for climate-exposed workers.

Climate change is increasing exposure to extreme heat, severe weather, poor air quality, changing patterns of pests and disease, and chemical risks. These hazards are especially severe for people working outdoors, in poorly ventilated processing and storage facilities, on fishing vessels, and in informal trading spaces without basic services:

4.1.3 Require workplace climate-risk assessments and binding health and safety plans.

Adaptation plans should require workplace climate-risk assessments and binding health and safety plans, and these should be developed with workers and trade unions. They should provide for clean drinking water, accessible toilets, shade, appropriate protective equipment, regulated rest breaks, adjusted working hours, heat-warning systems, emergency response procedures, safe worker transport, and the right to stop or refuse dangerous work without dismissal or loss of income. Informal traders must also have access to safe, serviced, and climate-resilient spaces in which to work.

4.1.4 Ensure effective local provision of essential services.

Meeting these needs depends partly on effective local governance, particularly the reliable provision and maintenance of water, sanitation, shelter, drainage, waste management, and other essential services. Provincial and municipal adaptation plans should therefore align with labour protections and service-delivery responsibilities to strengthen the health and safety of workers across formal and informal parts of the food system.

4.1.5 Make employers responsible for monitoring and responding to climate-related risks.

Employers should be required to monitor heat exposure, provide training and health surveillance, and reorganise work when exposure becomes unsafe. South Africa's 2025 Physical Agents Regulations already define heat stress as an occupational hazard, while the Occupational Health and Safety Act places a general duty on

employers to maintain workplaces that are safe and without risk to health. Adaptation planning should make these protections enforceable in the specific conditions of agriculture, fishing, food processing, logistics, and informal food trade.

4.1.6 Strengthen protection from chemical and pesticide exposure.

Workers must receive information and training in languages they understand, appropriate protective equipment at no cost, access to washing facilities and medical monitoring, and clear procedures for reporting exposure. The burden of protecting workers cannot be shifted onto individuals through requirements that they purchase their own safety equipment. Employers are responsible for providing protective equipment and maintaining safe systems of work.

4.1.7 Introduce sector-specific protections for fishers and informal traders.

Fishing-sector adaptation should include specific occupational safety measures for changing sea and weather conditions. This should include reliable weather and sea warnings, vessel-tracking and communication systems, properly maintained boats, life jackets and emergency equipment, accessible training and functioning rescue services. Safety standards should be designed with small-scale fishers so that compliance does not create unaffordable barriers to accessing the sea. Informal traders should similarly be included within local heat-health and disaster plans, with serviced and secure trading areas that provide shade, water, sanitation, drainage, electricity, storage and protection from flooding and fire.

4.2 Safeguard food system livelihoods and extend social protection

Objective: Protect people's ability to earn an income before, during and after climate-related disruptions, while expanding social protection.

4.2.1 Increase wages and establish stronger forms of income protection.

Climate resilience depends partly on whether people have sufficient incomes and savings to prepare for and recover from shocks. Workers receiving poverty wages cannot afford safer housing, transport, healthcare, food reserves, or time away from work during dangerous weather. The national minimum wage should therefore be progressively increased towards a living wage and properly enforced across the food system. Since 1 March 2026, the statutory minimum for most workers, including farmworkers, has been R30.23 per hour. This is a legal floor and should not be treated as the long-term standard for decent income. Collective bargaining and sectoral wage-setting should be strengthened to secure wages, benefits, and conditions above the statutory minimum.

Adaptation plans should prohibit employers from transferring climate-related costs to workers through reduced wages, unpaid downtime, excessive deductions, longer working hours, or increased production targets. Workers who are paid according to tasks, output, or piece rates require particular protection because climate conditions may reduce productivity and therefore income, even where working hours remain unchanged. Wage-setting and social-protection systems should recognise these changing conditions.

4.2.2 Establish a universal basic income grant.

A universal basic income grant is necessary to provide a stable income floor in the context of structural unemployment, widespread informal work, and increasing climate disruption. It should complement rather than replace wages, collective bargaining, unemployment insurance and other forms of social protection. A universal approach would reduce the gaps created by employment-based schemes and provide support before households reach complete destitution. South Africa's Just Transition Framework identifies income support, social safety nets and protection against extreme weather as central components of a just transition, while

subsequent work by the Presidential Climate Commission has argued for a comprehensive system that responds to physical climate shocks as well as employment transitions (Castel-Branco et al., 2025).

4.2.3 Require the private sector to contribute to income protection and adaptation.

The private sector should contribute to the costs of income protection and adaptation, particularly where large companies are dominant in food value chains or contribute significantly to environmental degradation and emissions. Public climate finance should not subsidise companies without binding commitments to preserve decent work, protect incomes, and comply with labour and environmental standards. Progressive taxation, employer contributions, and sectoral funds could be used to cross-subsidise support for workers, small-scale producers, and people earning livelihoods in the informal economy.

4.2.4 Strengthen the social wage

Secure housing, together with access to healthcare, education, safety, energy, water, sanitation, and affordable transport, are central to workers' ability to withstand climate and economic shocks. Workers living in insecure housing, on farms where accommodation is tied to employment, or in settlements without reliable services, face heightened exposure during floods, fires, heatwaves and water shortages. Loss of employment can also result in loss of housing, water access, transport, and schooling, multiplying the effects of a single climate or economic shock.

Adaptation plans should therefore assess the conditions in which workers and their households live, not only the resilience of workplaces and production systems. Farmworker housing should be safe, climate-resilient, and supported by secure tenure and access to services independent of the employment relationship. Municipal adaptation planning should prioritise drainage, flood protection, reliable water and sanitation, cool public spaces, healthcare, and affordable transport in areas where food-system workers and people earning their livelihoods in the informal economy live and work.

4.2.5 Prepare public healthcare systems for climate-related risks

Public healthcare systems should be prepared for increased heat illness, occupational injuries, respiratory conditions, pesticide exposure, waterborne disease, and mental-health impacts associated with livelihood loss and disasters. Services should be accessible to migrant, seasonal, and informal workers without discrimination or requirements that depend on permanent residence or formal employment. The National Heat Health Action Guidelines already recognise extreme heat as a public-health risk; these measures should be integrated with workplace protections and local adaptation plans.

4.2.6 Develop skills, reskilling programmes, and alternative livelihoods

Climate change and mitigation measures will alter employment across agriculture, fishing, processing, transport, retail, and waste. Skills planning should anticipate these changes rather than respond only after livelihoods have been lost. Sector Education and Training Authorities, public colleges, universities, extension services, and local government should work with workers, trade unions, small-scale producers, and communities to identify emerging skills needs and develop publicly funded training programmes.

Training should support both adaptation within existing livelihoods and movement into new forms of work. This may include agroecological production, soil and water restoration, ecological monitoring, renewable energy, efficient refrigeration, food processing, repair and maintenance, waste recovery, local-market infrastructure, and climate-resilient construction. Fishers may require support to diversify income during periods when fishing is unsafe or stocks decline, including into farming; farmworkers may need pathways into land-based production, cooperatives, processing, or ecological restoration. Informal traders should receive training and infrastructure support that strengthens rather than displaces their existing livelihoods.

4.2.7 Link skills programmes to employment, assets, and income support

Skills programmes must be linked to real employment, public procurement, finance, productive assets, and market access. Training alone cannot deliver a just transition where jobs are unavailable or workers cannot afford to participate. Workers should receive income support while training, recognition of prior learning, and portable qualifications. Programmes should be accessible in local languages, accommodate care responsibilities, and prioritise workers and communities most likely to be displaced. South Africa's Just Transition Framework identifies active labour-market measures, skills development, economic diversification, and social protection as interconnected interventions, while the Just Energy Transition Skills Desk has similarly prioritised reskilling workers in vulnerable value chains and improving labour-market planning.

4.2.8 Protect existing livelihoods and ensure decent work in new jobs.

Alternative-livelihood programmes should not be used to justify the premature destruction of existing livelihoods. People should have a meaningful choice over whether to remain in and adapt their current work, move into new employment, or combine different livelihood strategies. New green jobs should meet decent-work standards, including secure contracts, living wages, collective rights and safe working conditions.

4.3 Provide effective disaster relief

Objective: Ensure fast, fair disaster relief that helps affected people recover.

4.3.1 Provide rapid and comprehensive disaster relief and recovery support

Disaster relief must respond to the full effects of climate disasters on incomes and livelihoods, rather than focusing mainly on emergency food parcels and temporary shelter. Workers, informal traders, farmers, and fishers may lose wages, crops, catches, tools, boats, livestock, trading stock, storage facilities, and access to places of work. Relief systems should provide immediate income and food support, followed by timely assistance to repair or replace productive assets and restore livelihoods.

4.3.2 Establish clear responsibilities and pre-arranged funding

The National Disaster Management Framework recognises social relief as part of disaster response but also emphasises reducing vulnerability and rebuilding resilience. Adaptation plans should translate this principle into clear livelihood-recovery responsibilities for national departments, provinces, and municipalities. Relief funds should be pre-arranged, accessible, and capable of being released before households become destitute. Support should not depend only on a formal national disaster declaration where localised floods, fires, storms, or droughts have already caused severe livelihood losses.

4.3.3 Tailor recovery support to the needs of affected groups

Recovery support should be differentiated according to the needs of affected groups. Farmworkers may require wage replacement, temporary housing, and protection against dismissal or eviction. Small-scale producers may need seed, livestock, water infrastructure, equipment, and debt relief. Fishers may need boats, engines, safety equipment, harbour infrastructure, and support during prolonged closures. Informal traders may require replacement stock, equipment, storage, and secure alternative trading spaces. Application procedures should recognise informal ownership and income arrangements and should not require documents that affected people are unlikely to possess.

4.3.4 Use reconstruction to reduce future vulnerability

Reconstruction should reduce future vulnerability rather than restore unsafe infrastructure and unequal conditions. Markets, workplaces, farms, harbours, housing, and public infrastructure should be retrofitted to

improved climate-resilience and accessibility standards, with affected workers and communities involved in deciding how recovery funds are used. Employers and large companies should contribute to recovery where their practices, infrastructure failures, or environmental damage have increased the scale of losses.

4.3.5 Develop effective and accurate early-warning systems.

Local early-warning systems should provide timely, accessible, and actionable information to food system actors and communities, to enable them to take measures to mitigate climate impacts or avoid loss and damage. Early-warning systems should be explicitly disability-inclusive, multilingual, culturally appropriate, and accessible to people with visual and hearing impairments.

4.4 Build resilient and sustainable food production and distribution systems

Objective: Ensure food security for all while preventing food production from degrading the environment.

4.4.1 Redistribute and secure access to land, water, and the sea

Accelerate land redistribution and strengthen tenure security. Equitable land access and ownership are essential to a just and climate-resilient food system. The stalled land reform programme should be revived, with rapid finalisation of outstanding labour tenant and restitution claims, and redistribution of land and tenure security, especially to the Black population, women, and youth.

Good-quality land should be prioritised for productive use, with local communities involved in assessments. Prior use or abuse of land should be considered in any payment for land for redistribution. Local municipalities should have five-year targets for land redistribution, based on a nationally agreed target.

Strengthening local, climate-resilient food production should be an economic and social priority, above other land uses. Large land allocations for other uses, including mining, energy and biodiversity, should not displace food producers, particularly women. A diversity of land ownership models should be adopted to accommodate different needs. Farmworkers should have right of first refusal on the sale of commercial farms.

Appropriate and comprehensive support to land reform beneficiaries should be provided to enable the effective use of the land and sustainable ecosystem management. Water access and rights should go together with land redistribution. Land management should be democratised through participatory and inclusive local land committees and democratic land management structures.

Promote water equity. Priority should be given to meeting everyone's basic human needs, maintaining the ecological reserve, and reallocating productive water-use rights to accommodate and support smallholder producers. Water use for domestic food security should be prioritised over water-intensive export production.

Critical water shortages should be addressed through limiting high water use, fair water allocation, stopping water pollution, fixing leaks, and recharging and protecting groundwater sources. Households and smallholder farmers should be supported with appropriate water storage infrastructure, such as water tanks.

Smallholder farmers should receive exemptions from water licensing requirements, and the public sector should pay the costs of the hydrological studies which are needed before receiving public sector farm support. The current governance architecture (Water Boards, Catchment Management Agencies, Water User Associations) should be democratised.

Strengthen farmer-managed seed systems. Seed saving, seed banks, seed exchange and farmer seed systems

should be promoted. Policies and programmes should be developed to strengthen farmers' rights to save, use, exchange, and sell seed, in accordance with the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), to which the South African government is a party. Community-based production and distribution of organic, indigenous and local seed and seedlings should be promoted and supported as part of an agroecological reorientation.

4.4.2 Promote agroecology and regenerative agriculture

Climate resilience requires both changes in production practices and the public systems needed to support their adoption.

Support climate-resilient production practices at all scales. Production techniques that strengthen resilience to climate extremes should be promoted and supported at all scales of production, particularly in response to drought, floods, and extreme high or low temperatures. These techniques should include:

- Soil water conservation and micro-climate control, such as contour ridges/swales to slow and retain water and recharge aquifers
- Permanent ground cover and increased soil organic matter to improve moisture retention and fertility
- Agroforestry and trees in fields to provide shade and cooling
- Rainwater and runoff harvesting and storage
- Drought-tolerant and locally adapted seed and livestock breeds

Production methods that contribute to both mitigation and adaptation should be promoted, drawing on examples from the 2015 agriculture sector Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Plan (CCAMP) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Measures should include:

- Promoting the use of animal manure, farm-produced compost, green manures, and legumes for soil fertility
- Promoting on-farm and local waste recycling and reuse, eliminating the use of toxic chemicals, and reducing dependence on external inputs.
- Strengthening mixed farming and small-scale poultry, livestock and fish production for local markets.
- Promoting urban agriculture and homestead, community, and school gardens wherever possible, and incorporating these into urban and spatial planning.
- Supporting *ilima* and other traditional and collective practices of shared work.
- Reviving and promoting indigenous agricultural knowledge, practices and foods, including the diversification of staple foods.
- Developing and promoting the adoption of appropriate technologies for smallholder farmers, small-scale fishers, and informal traders to sustain the production, processing, storage, and distribution of healthy fresh produce.

Strengthen agroecological education, training, and knowledge sharing. Agroecology and nutrition should be integrated into curricula at all levels (schools, universities, training colleges, extension services) with a strong practical element. Demand-led and accredited training programmes in agroecology, agro-processing and ecological land use management should be developed and supported, with recognition of prior learning.

Indigenous, intergenerational and local knowledge should be integrated into education and training. The development of community-led agroecology hubs, learning and demonstration sites, and farmer-to-farmer sharing and exchange should be supported. Emphasis should be placed on education, training and support for youth and women. Use local languages for training, communications and awareness raising. Diverse communications channels and methods should be used to reach people.

Invest in agroecological infrastructure and inputs. Public investment should support shade nets, water storage, soil restoration, composting systems, indigenous seeds, seed banks, landscape design and climate-resilient cropping systems. As farmers argued, agroecology cannot be carried by farmers alone; it needs infrastructure and public support.

4.4.3 Reduce GHG emissions in the food system

Require the agri-food system to contribute its share of GHG emissions reductions. South Africa's 2nd NDC calls for annual emissions to be reduced to 320 -380 Mt CO₂-eq by 2035. This is 19-32% below 2020 emissions. The agri-food system should therefore reduce emissions to this range by 2035.

Priority categories for emissions reductions in agri-food are livestock, energy and transport, and non-CO₂ emissions on the land (mainly crop residues, use of synthetic fertiliser, and burning biomass). "Quick wins" include refrigeration (switch to natural refrigerants), resource use efficiency, and organic waste reduction and recycling. The largest emitters should bear the greatest responsibility for reductions.

4.4.4 Protect and strengthen small-scale fishing livelihoods

Remove regulatory obstacles that prevent small-scale fishers from adapting to changing conditions. Quotas, baskets, permits, and rights allocations should be reviewed to protect small-scale fishers' livelihoods and food sovereignty. Adaptation plans must address how climate change is affecting fish stocks, species movement, sea conditions, and access to fishing grounds.

Designated fishing areas and regulated fishing periods should be made more flexible to allow fishers to make up for missed periods due to weather. Cooperative and joint venture ownership models, organisational forms, and procurement systems should be revisited to accommodate greater agency for small-scale fishers.

Invest in fisher-owned infrastructure from catch to market. Investment should support boats, safety equipment, cold storage, processing facilities, drying and canning facilities, transport, harbour markets, and fish auctions. Fishers need this infrastructure to adapt when fish move further offshore, when weather reduces fishing days, and when they need to preserve and sell catches safely.

4.4.5 Strengthen local food production, distribution, and markets

Prioritise local food production and distribution. Local production and distribution should be strengthened to spread risk and improve household and local food security. There should be particular emphasis on women, given their central role in food provisioning.

Community, farmer, and fish markets at harbours should be promoted. Informal traders and local preferential public procurement should be supported.

Invest in local food infrastructure. Support should be provided for local food production and distribution, especially at local government level. For informal traders this should include serviced trading spaces with shade, water, sanitation, electricity, storage, cold-chain facilities, waste management, and protection from floods and heat.

Reform municipal regulation of informal trade. Municipalities should review by-laws that exclude, harass or displace informal traders. Regulation should make food safety and compliance possible through training, infrastructure, and organisation, not punishment. This is important for adaptation because informal traders often serve communities during economic and climate shocks, but they cannot do so if they are constantly insecure.

Build local supply chains. Adaptation plans should link informal traders to local farmers, fishers and food producers, creating local supply chains between informal traders, small-scale farmers, fishers, cooperatives, and public procurement systems. This can strengthen local economies, reduce dependence on long supply chains, reduce emissions from transport, build resilience and diversity in the food system, and improve access to fresh affordable food.

4.5 Make nutritious food affordable

Objective: Ensure that everyone can afford sufficient, nutritious food, including during climate-related shocks.

4.5.1 Take urgent measures to promote access to affordable, nutritious, and sustainable food

These measures should include food price controls, food reserves, and support for diverse food production.

4.5.2 Regulate commercial market power in support of domestic food security

Adaptation plans should assess the role of commercial farmers, retailers and agribusinesses in shaping food prices, exports, quality and access. Where climate shocks reduce supply, market power can worsen hunger and deepen inequality. Plans should include targets for preferential procurement from small-scale producers for the public sector and private companies, and stronger regulation of corporate concentration. These plans should include regulation of supermarket and retailer practices, prevention of profiteering, and redirecting edible surplus food to communities before it is wasted.

4.5.3 Establish decentralised public food reserves

Adaptation plans should include decentralised public buffer stocks or food reserves to protect households from climate-related price spikes, crop failures and supply disruptions. These reserves should be built through local procurement, including from small-scale farmers, fishers and cooperatives.

5. Conclusion

Building a climate-resilient food system will require adaptation plans that respond to the very different realities of producers, workers, traders, fishers and communities across South Africa. Climate change is already intensifying hunger, livelihood insecurity, unsafe working conditions, ecological degradation, and unequal access to land, water, food, and productive resources.

Adaptation planning must therefore address the structural conditions that make some people and sectors far more vulnerable than others. It cannot be limited to technical measures aimed at maintaining existing systems of production and distribution.

The implementation of the Climate Change Act presents an important opportunity to put the food system on the climate agenda. National, sectoral, provincial, and municipal adaptation plans should be guided by the right to food and food sovereignty, redistribution, environmental sustainability, gender justice, meaningful participation, and effective and accountable government action. These principles should shape the priorities, measures, budgets, and outcomes contained in adaptation plans.

The priorities set out in this paper call for action to protect workers from climate-related risks, safeguard livelihoods and extend social protection, provide effective disaster relief and recovery, redistribute access to productive resources, support agroecological and climate-resilient production, strengthen small-scale fishing and local food systems, reduce GHG emissions, and ensure that nutritious food is affordable. These must be supported by adequate public funding, stronger regulation of corporate power, clear institutional responsibilities,

and mechanisms for affected constituencies to monitor implementation and hold government and the private sector accountable.

The priorities in this paper provide a focused contribution to that work, but they cannot capture every intervention needed across all sectors, provinces and municipalities. More detailed measures must be developed with the constituencies affected and shaped by local conditions, institutional responsibilities and sector-specific risks. The principles outlined in this paper can guide that wider process and help ensure that adaptation planning is equitable, participatory, environmentally sustainable and grounded in the right to food. Their implementation would contribute not only to protecting the food system from climate shocks, but also to transforming it so that it provides secure livelihoods, distributes resources and power more fairly, restores ecosystems, and guarantees access to sufficient, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for all.

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