

**POLICY ROUNDTABLE:
PUTTING FOOD SYSTEMS
ON THE CLIMATE POLICY
AGENDA**



WORKSHOP REPORT

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Introduction

The Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ) hosted a policy roundtable on food systems and climate policy, with representatives of grassroots constituencies and relevant policy-makers, in Pretoria on 12 August 2026. The roundtable was the culmination of a broader process to build the capacity of food system constituencies to engage with the Climate Change Act. The process aims to support producers, workers, and communities to engage in upcoming national, sectoral, and municipal adaptation planning, and to ensure that their priorities are reflected in the just transition of South Africa's food system. The policy roundtable had the following objectives:

- Present the [civil society position paper](#) and its key proposals to relevant government departments and policymakers.
- Create a space for the constituencies that shaped the paper to interact with policymakers on their priorities.
- Encourage dialogue between government departments whose work affects the food system, including climate, agriculture, water, land, labour, trade, and local government.
- Understand where key climate policy processes currently stand, including national, sectoral, and municipal planning processes, and how civil society can influence and shape them using the position paper and other mechanisms.

A key value of the roundtable was that it created a space for dialogue between grassroots food system constituencies and policymakers. The grassroots participants included smallholder farmers, informal traders, farm workers, labour representatives, and fishers, with strong representation from women across these constituencies that helped shape the policy position paper. They were joined by policymakers responsible for implementing the Climate Change Act, including the Departments of Environment, Agriculture, Health, and Water and Sanitation, as well as the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA). The roundtable was an opportunity to discuss the proposals in the position paper alongside the lived experiences and priorities of the various represented constituencies. This was important because food system adaptation will require action across multiple areas of government, including sectoral planning, municipal processes, water governance, agricultural policy, health systems, and climate finance.

This brief report presents the key issues and themes to emerge from the roundtable.



The Climate Change Act update

Thabang Phago, Director for Adaptation and Natural Resources at the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), provided an update on the implementation of the Climate Change Act. Mr Phago noted that implementation of the Climate Change Act is beginning to move from legislation into practical preparation. Work is underway to develop technical guidelines and templates for provincial, municipal and sectoral climate planning, assess the readiness of provinces and municipalities, and support the updating of older climate response plans. Climate scenarios have been developed with technical institutions, work on objectives and indicators has started, and the government is also progressing with climate finance mechanisms. Departments have also started requesting guidance on developing Sector Adaptation Plans, and some Departments have already developed theirs (such as Water and Sanitation).

Several important elements are still not fully in place. Some provisions of the Act, including those dealing with provincial and municipal response planning and climate finance, have been deferred, even though preparatory work continues in the background. Many municipal plans remain outdated, the review of the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (NCCAS) has not yet begun, and the indicators that will guide implementation are still being developed. Alignment between climate planning and existing municipal processes such as Integrated

Development Plans (IDPs) is also still being worked out. DFFE acknowledged that coordination between departments remains uneven and that opportunities for civil society participation in provincial and local intergovernmental structures are still limited.

The grassroots Position Paper

The position paper was presented as a collective civil-society contribution to the implementation of the Climate Change Act. It was developed through engagement with different food-system constituencies and framed climate adaptation as a food-system issue rather than an agricultural issue alone. The paper first set out a series of guiding principles intended to shape how adaptation plans are designed, implemented and assessed, such as the right to food and meaningful participation. The intention was for these principles to guide decision-making across different adaptation plans and help ensure that responses are equitable, participatory and responsive to the needs of those most affected by climate change.

The paper then translated these principles into five priority intervention areas that are important for people-centred adaptation:

1. Protect and improve working conditions in the food system
2. Safeguard food-system livelihoods and extend social protection
3. Provide effective disaster relief
4. Build resilient and sustainable food production and distribution systems
5. Make nutritious food affordable

The position paper can be accessed [here](#).

The presentation was strengthened by direct inputs from grassroots groups, who added detail based on their own experiences. Smallholder farmers spoke about water insecurity, unpredictable seasons and weak support systems; fishers raised declining stocks, changing sea conditions and difficulties accessing permits and infrastructure; and informal traders described insecure trading spaces, weak municipal support and exclusion from planning processes. These contributions helped ground the broader principles and intervention areas in the practical realities that adaptation planning will need to address.



Key lessons for planning and implementation

The policy roundtable generated lively discussion across different perspectives. Several key themes, areas of agreement and possible pathways forward emerged. This section draws together the main lessons from the roundtable and highlights what they suggest for strengthening the implementation of climate adaptation for a just food system.

Existing barriers

The roundtable highlighted that vulnerability is not created by climate change alone. Limited income, insecure work, weak infrastructure, poor access to water, markets or services, and inadequate social protection all reduce people's ability to respond to climate shocks. The civil society position paper frames adaptation as addressing the underlying conditions that make certain groups more vulnerable, and not only responding to climate hazards. This was reflected in policy-maker discussions about whether existing institutions and planning systems, and insufficient institutional alignment, enable or constrain adaptive capacity.

Moving from policy to action

The main challenge is no longer identifying adaptation actions, but creating an implementation architecture. Policy makers repeatedly stressed that many of the necessary interventions are

already known. The bigger question is how to prioritise, sequence, fund and allocate responsibility for them. This means clearly identifying which department or sphere of government is responsible for each objective and linking new climate plans to existing mandates, sector plans, IDPs and other planning frameworks. Grassroots inputs reinforced this by highlighting practical barriers people face in accessing water, land, infrastructure, markets, services and other forms of support. This suggests that implementation should be judged not only by whether plans exist, but by whether they translate into tangible support on the ground.

Coordination and institutional alignment

Institutional and response fragmentation was one of the strongest themes arising. Food system adaptation cuts across agriculture, water, health, local government, infrastructure and other areas, but these institutions do not always plan or implement together. Policymakers and civil society alike therefore emphasised stronger coordination mechanisms, clearer institutional ownership and greater involvement of municipalities, because much of the actual implementation must happen locally.

There needs to be a more active flow of information between national government, local government, civil society and communities. Discussions pointed to information gaps: provincial actors may not know about national programmes, local government may not know what resources are available, and civil society may not know which processes are underway. Better dissemination of government programmes, research, public consultation opportunities and implementation progress emerged as an important set of enabling conditions.

Localisation and participation

Adaptation planning needs to become much more locally specific and participatory. Many participants cautioned against adaptation plans that remain broad national frameworks. Different places, communities, and sectors experience climate impacts differently, meaning vulnerability needs to be understood geographically and socially. People living in each place know what their priorities are, and often also know what the required resilience and adaptation actions are. Plans must be shaped by local participation, and local solutions can both be supported and added to.

Different food-system constituencies experience climate change very differently, so a single adaptation response will not be sufficient.

The position paper and grassroots inputs at the roundtable highlighted the different realities facing smallholder farmers, workers, fishers, women, informal traders, and communities. This reinforces the need for adaptation planning to begin with the question of who is vulnerable, where, and why, rather than starting with a generic list of climate interventions. Policymakers strongly echoed this emphasis on place-based vulnerability and differentiated responses.

Proactive participation and civil society involvement are essential

A strong message was that influence is built before a draft policy reaches the consultation stage. Civil society needs to become known to relevant directorates, get onto stakeholder databases, engage while plans are still being conceptualised, and maintain relationships throughout implementation. The government, in turn, needs to create mechanisms for civil society to participate during planning rather than simply opening short consultation windows at the end of drafting. Public resources to enable comprehensive participation throughout policy development and implementation processes are needed; otherwise, communities and their organisations are not able to participate effectively.

More engagement is needed at provincial, district, and local levels.

National government may set the policy direction, but much of the funding, programme delivery, and implementation happens below the national level. Participants repeatedly noted the disconnection between national programmes and provincial and local awareness and implementation. Civil society must build relationships not only with national departments, but with provincial departments, and district and local municipalities.

Accountability must follow participation.

Based on experience over the past decades, civil society participants expressed some scepticism that recommendations from engagements will actually enter policy or be implemented. Participants therefore called for the government to report back, maintain records of comments and responses, and follow through on commitments. The underlying message was that consultation should create an accountable and two-way relationship, rather than becoming another “tick-box” exercise.

Monitoring and learning

Adaptation needs stronger systems for monitoring, accountability and learning. An important gap is the limited ability to determine whether adaptation measures are actually working. The PCC noted that the Act contains stronger provisions for mitigation data than for adaptation and argued that the government needs systems to track adaptation actions, outcomes and impacts. This would allow policy to be adjusted over time rather than simply measuring whether plans have been produced.

Climate finance

Climate finance needs to be built into adaptation planning from the beginning. Policy makers were clear that plans without funding are unlikely to translate into implementation. The PCC highlighted that adaptation receives a relatively small share of climate finance and argued for stronger mechanisms to channel finance towards adaptation, particularly at local government level. DFFE similarly emphasised developing interventions into credible and investable programmes rather than treating financing as something that comes after the plan is developed. Grassroots groups said inadequate finance is experienced through weak access to the actual resources people need to adapt, including infrastructure, water, services and livelihood support.

The issue is therefore not only how much adaptation finance is available, but whether it reaches the people and places facing the greatest barriers to adaptation.

Using existing pathways

Implementation should build on existing policies and institutions rather than continuously creating new frameworks. Several departments already have climate-related strategies, plans, and programmes underway. Agriculture is reviewing its climate adaptation plan, Health has incorporated climate risks into environmental health and municipal planning processes, and Water and Sanitation already has a climate response strategy in implementation. The emerging lesson is therefore that the Climate Change Act should help align, strengthen, and scale existing work rather than creating a parallel policy system. Existing plans also provide possible inroads for civil society to engage and shape or support the implementation of a just food system. However, key elements of just food system transformation need to be more strongly centred in these plans, and so there is still content for civil society to promote.



Conclusion

The policy roundtable met its objectives by creating a space for civil society, grassroots constituencies, and policymakers to engage directly on priorities for climate adaptation in the food system. Importantly, it also helped build relationships and identify areas of shared concern and common ground. These relationships provide a strong basis for continued engagement as adaptation plans and related Climate Change Act processes move forward. The IEJ and Just Transition Network will follow up with policymakers on connection points identified at the roundtable, further encourage and support civil society participation in shaping the plans and their implementation, work with others to engage with Departments such as Agriculture to influence the development of such plans, and work with constituencies to submit comments and attend consultations when they open up on sector adaptation plans, especially for agriculture and fisheries.

The policy roundtable was hosted by the IEJ in collaboration with the Climate Working Group in the Just Transition in the Food System Network. The roundtable and the process culminating in it were partly supported by the Commonwealth Foundation.

