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Making Sense Together? The Role of Academics in the Co-Production of Knowledge for Local Food Governance in South Africa

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Abstract

This article seeks to bring more clarity on the role of scientists in the co-production of knowledge for food security. Food systems in South Africa are in transition. Universities can play a particularly important role in facilitating the effective dialogue between academics, civil society and policy-makers that is essential to navigate these transitions. However, integrating scientific knowledge with social, ecological, political knowledge through participatory processes ('making sense together') calls for a reorganisation of science: where researchers become part of the same process that the knowledge they offer aims to inform. Yet much of the research on the new role of scientists in producing knowledge is theoretical and empirical verification is often lacking. This article constructs an analytical framework based on the existing science policy studies literature that incorporates three stages: 'problem exploration', 'problem puzzling', and 'problem solving'. The article then tests this framework against the experiences of scientists in the co-production of a local government food security policy in South Africa. The Western Cape Provincial Government Household Food and Nutrition Security Strategic Framework was drafted in 2015 and 2016 by a team of policy makers and academics through a series of collaborative workshops and interviews with key stakeholders. The aim of this process was to embed scientific and political knowledge in context specific knowledge using a 'whole of society approach' deliberately crowding in a diverse range of individuals, organisations and departments to identify strategic priorities and opportunities. The analysis reveals some key lessons as well as likely challenges that could guide food security scientists who wish to engage in the co-production of knowledge in future.

Keywords: Co-production of knowledge, food security, science policy interface, South Africa