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Local Governance of Agriculture and Nutrition Programmes for Achieving Sustainable Diets in Vaalharts, South Africa

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Introduction

Despite the fact that South Africa is considered food secure at national level, a paradox nutrition transition is evident, showing rising levels of obesity and at the same time high rates of nutrition insecure households (SANHANES-1, 2014). As is the case for many emerging but also developing countries, South Africa is facing the so-called ‘triple challenge’: a) promoting transition in agrifood systems away from raising production towards ensuring sustainable diets, b) reducing undernutrition and micronutrient deficiency, and c) counteracting the development of overweight and obesity, and non-communicable diseases (De Schutter, 2011). In order to address the complexities of contemporary public health, nutrition, environmental, social, and sustainability challenges, FAO and Bioversity International (2012) conceptualised and defined sustainable diets as ‘those diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources.’ (FAO & Bioversity International, 2012, p. 7).

The right to have access to sufficient food and water is enshrined in the South African Constitution and great efforts have been made on agriculture and nutrition policies in the past 15 years. As such, South Africa’s legal framework is favourable towards more sustainable diets, however, in reality policy and programme implementations as well as governance are often inadequate (UNSCN, 2013).

Material and Methods

As part of the larger project ‘Sustainability of diets in rural South Africa’ (Claasen, et. al., 2015), this study followed a qualitative approach to investigate 12 ongoing agriculture and nutrition programmes. Observations and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were carried out with decision makers from governments (n=6) and civil society (n=4) as well as beneficiaries (n=20). Three programmes were then identified for in-depth investigation, namely: community soup kitchens run by NGOs in partnership with the Department of Social Development; the agricultural food production support programme ‘Fetsa Tlala’ for small-scale farmers run by the

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Department of Agriculture; and the hospital based nutrition education component of the integrated nutrition programme by the Department of Health.

Content analysis was employed using ATLAS.ti in order to single out achievements and challenges within the programmes and unveil underlying common characteristics. These were then analysed from a sustainable diets lens to find out how these programmes are supportive towards realising sustainable diets and what other factors need further attention.

Results and Discussion

The Fetsa Tlala Food Production Initiative in Phokwane Municipality

Together with the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security and the Household Food and Nutrition Security Strategy, the Fetsa Tlala Food Production Initiative (FTFPI) is part of a policy scheme approved in September 2013, that attempts to ensure that every citizen has access to adequate food and nutrition. The specific task of the FTFPI is to stimulate food production. For this purpose the government aims to make one million hectares of land available for small-scale farming and integrate smallholders into national and international markets structures. The District Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries is responsible for coordination and distribution of funds in each respective area (Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2014).

The agricultural job creation in the Phokwane Municipality through the FTFPI extends beyond the actual beneficiaries. The farmers who are being supported as beneficiaries employ labourers at their farms who are being recruited in most cases especially from poor and rural areas. Many families in townships and informal settlements depend on farm labour during the harvesting season. By the year 2015 some formerly supported projects such as farms and primary food processing plants had reached a state of self-sufficiency. Among the projects observed here, those that benefitted from governmental support programmes show high social responsibility. Furthermore, emphasis is put on the promotion of women in agriculture and female farmers.

On the other hand favouritism and cronyism pose a problem during the selection of beneficiaries and not all beneficiaries are committed to the programme. Those smallholder beneficiaries that are successful struggle with theft. Also the goods that are being produced through the Fetsa Tlala Programme are often going into the established centralistic organised food system instead of being distributed via local food structures. Additionally, environmental awareness among the beneficiaries in terms of farming is still in its early infancy.

Community Soup Kitchens in Phokwane Municipality

Under the Medium Term Strategic Framework 2014-2019 the local Department of Social Development in Jan Kempdorp initiated the foundation of three soul kitchens (SK) in poverty stricken areas to ensure a minimum supply of food to poor households. Especially in the starting phase SKs need strong mentorship and rely on initial external funding. A well-established SK is usually registered as NGO and governed by volunteers from the community. Findings indicate that the SKs achieved to guarantee a basic food supply in their communities. The SK further serves as a gateway for the Department of Social Development to extend their additional services. Specific problems are being identified (e.g. lack of ID or domestic violence) and the SK personnel help its beneficiaries with visits to the authorities or refer problems to the relevant governmental departments. Apart from being a social platform the SKs organise awareness campaigns (e.g. HIV or security issues) with the cooperation of governmental departments and plan to offer classes for illiterate people in future.

On the other hand, the SKs are battling with the challenges commonly experienced by NGOs, such as lack of sustainable funding and finding private donors to help their cause. Food is being purchased at the big supermarkets and the food schedule established for every day of the week is repeated for a year. This makes financial planning easier, however, local food structures are not being supported and the beneficiaries' diet lacks in variety. Unfortunately, SKs have neither the funds nor the expertise to offer a fully nutritious and diversified diet.

Hospital-Based Nutrition Education in Jan Kempdorp

The nutrition education of hospital patients is part of the Integrated Nutrition Programme, which is funded and coordinated by the Department of Health, in accordance with the Integrated Nutrition Strategy.

The hospital offers family-oriented nutrition advice, in particular to pregnant women and people with lifestyle-related diseases. Undernourished children and adults receive food supplements to enrich their diet. A ward-based outreach team is currently being trained by the hospital, among others with regard to healthy nutrition, to improve the follow-up on patients. Depending on the case, some patients are also being referred to an NGO-run vegetable garden on the hospital premises where volunteers offer advice on how to grow your own food.

In spite of that, especially the poorest of the poor, who have minimal contact with authorities, distrust medical advice from the hospital. Some patients do go to the hospital with grievances, although they do not comply with the treatment that is being suggested to them.

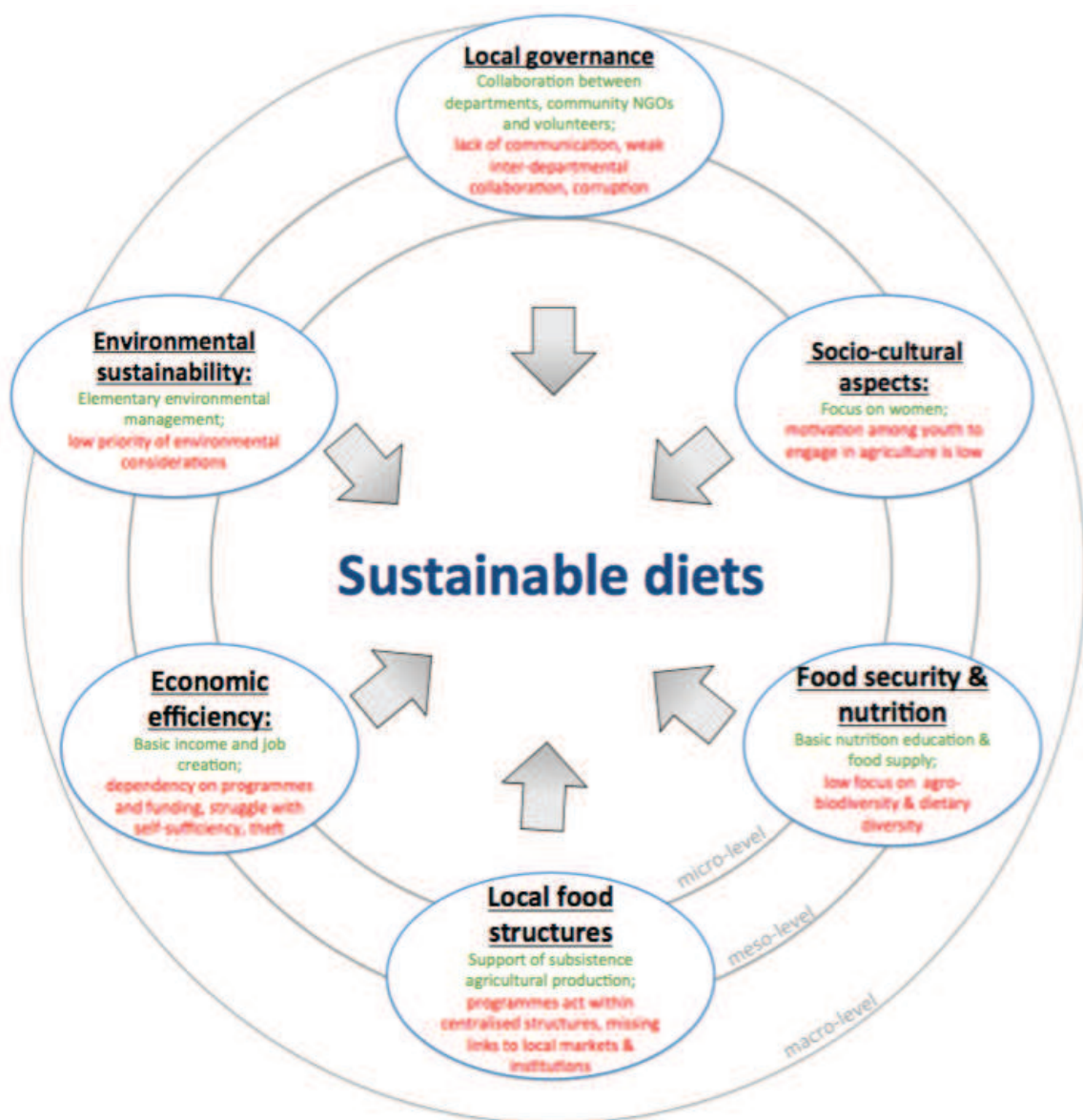


Fig. 1: The sustainable diets framework: analysis from a sustainable diets lens (adapted from Claasen, et. al., 2015)

Addressing the six dimensions of the concept sustainable diets, as was elaborated among others by Lang (2012), is important for the achievement of sustainable diets. Figure 1 summarises achievements and challenges of the programmes investigated here from a sustainable diets lens.

Various governmental programmes have been implemented in Vaalharts addressing poverty, food insecurity and nutritional challenges; however, factors that are decisive for the achievement of sustainable diets are not being addressed holistically, such as support of local economies, nutrition-sensitive food production, cultural knowledge and environmental protection. Existing programmes rather focus on socio-economic support and food and nutrition security to address the immediate needs of these communities.

Additionally, departments often struggle with identifying eligible and committed beneficiaries, and staff capacities are too limited to follow up on all cases after programme implementation. Inter-sectorial communication and collaboration are often insufficient to address the complex challenges within these communities. NGOs and CSOs seem to be more embedded within the communities and combine programmes that address poverty, hunger, skills development, and legal support in an integrated way. Yet, these programmes often face financial and capacity-building difficulties, particularly in the beginning phase.

Conclusions and Outlook

For the promotion of sustainable diets it is crucial to integrate local governance with the other five dimensions. The sustainable diets framework highlights that programmes have only limited impact if they lack an integrated approach. Thus, many synergy effects remain untapped that could be utilised. More holistic and inter-sectorial approaches, integrating different sectors and disciplines, are necessary to address human, cultural, environmental, economic as well as health and nutrition aspects to establish sustainable diets in rural South Africa.

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