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

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Abstract

South Africa's food and nutrition policies are favourable towards sustainable diets. Yet, the country, despite being food secure at national level, battles with high levels of household food insecurity, childhood malnutrition, obesity and diet-related diseases.

This study explored the local governance of agriculture and nutrition programmes in seven rural resource-poor communities in the Vaalharts region, and whether they are supportive towards sustainable diets.

As part of the larger project ‘Sustainability of diets in rural South Africa’, this study followed a qualitative approach to investigate 12 existing programmes. Observations and face-to-face interviews were carried out with decision makers from governments (n=6) and civil society (n=3) as well as beneficiaries (n=27). Three programmes were then identified for in-depth investigation, namely: soup kitchens run by NGOs in partnership with the Department of Social Development; agricultural support programme for small-scale farmers run by the Department of Agriculture; and the nutrition education component of the integrated nutrition programme of the Department of Health.

Various governmental programmes have been implemented in Vaalharts to address poverty, food insecurity and nutritional challenges in the communities. Departments, however, often struggle with identifying eligible and committed beneficiaries and staff capacities are too low to follow-up on cases after programme implementation. Further, 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. However, these programmes often face financial and capacity-building difficulties, particularly in the beginning phase. Existing programmes focus on socio-economic support and food and nutrition security to address the immediate needs of these communities. The support of local economies, nutrition-sensitive food production, cultural knowledge and environmental protection that are crucial for more sustainable diets seem to be of less priority.

The study highlights the important role of local governance for achieving food and nutrition security in these communities. Capacity building of local decision makers, inter-sectorial collaboration, and recommendations on sustainable diets should be given priority in future programmes to achieve more healthy and sustainable diets in Vaalharts.

Keywords: Food and nutrition security, local governance, South Africa, sustainable diets