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Beyond compliance: Food security and governance in South Africa's table grape sector

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Abstract

The wellbeing and fairness along global agri-food value chains is frequently conceptualised as an outcome of employment and compliance with standards. However, this assumption obscures structural and governance-related drivers of food insecurity among agricultural workers. This paper critically examines food security among seasonal farmworkers in South Africa's export-oriented table grape sector, situating the analysis within debates on global value chain governance and private regulation.

The study combines an exploratory survey, focus group discussions, participatory Net-Map analysis, and semi-structured interviews with multiple actors (farmworkers, producers, auditors, and industry representatives). This multi-method approach enables a triangulated analysis of lived experiences, institutional arrangements, and actor-specific perceptions of influence and accountability.

Empirically, the findings demonstrate that food insecurity is not primarily driven by availability constraints, but by unstable and insufficient access linked to income volatility, seasonal employment, and asymmetric power relations within the actors in the value chain. While the private standards, regulatory frameworks and governance arrangements emphasise formal compliance, particularly regarding wages and labour conditions, they tend to overlook the temporal and structural dimensions of food access possibilities of farm workers. Building on this critique, the Food Security Standard (FSS) is examined as a potential outcome-oriented governance instrument that explicitly integrates food security dimensions into certification frameworks.

Beyond its empirical contribution, the paper engages with broader debates on outcome-oriented sustainability governance by highlighting the gap between formal compliance and experienced well-being. It argues that addressing food insecurity within agri-food value chains requires moving beyond audit-based indicators toward governance approaches that account for temporal income dynamics, labour precarity, and the distribution of power across actors. The study shows that sustainability standards can only contribute to improved food security outcomes when they move beyond static compliance metrics to address income volatility across seasons, reduce workers' reliance on debt-based coping strategies, and incorporate mechanisms that account for power asymmetries between buyers, producers, and labour. By reframing food security as a governance-dependent outcome shaped by power relations and institutional design, the paper contributes to advancing critical perspectives on sustainability standards and highlights the limitations of existing regulatory approaches in addressing worker well-being in global agri-food systems.

Keywords: Food security, global value chains, governance, income volatility, labour precarity, power relations, seasonal farmworkers, South Africa, sustainability standards, table grape sector