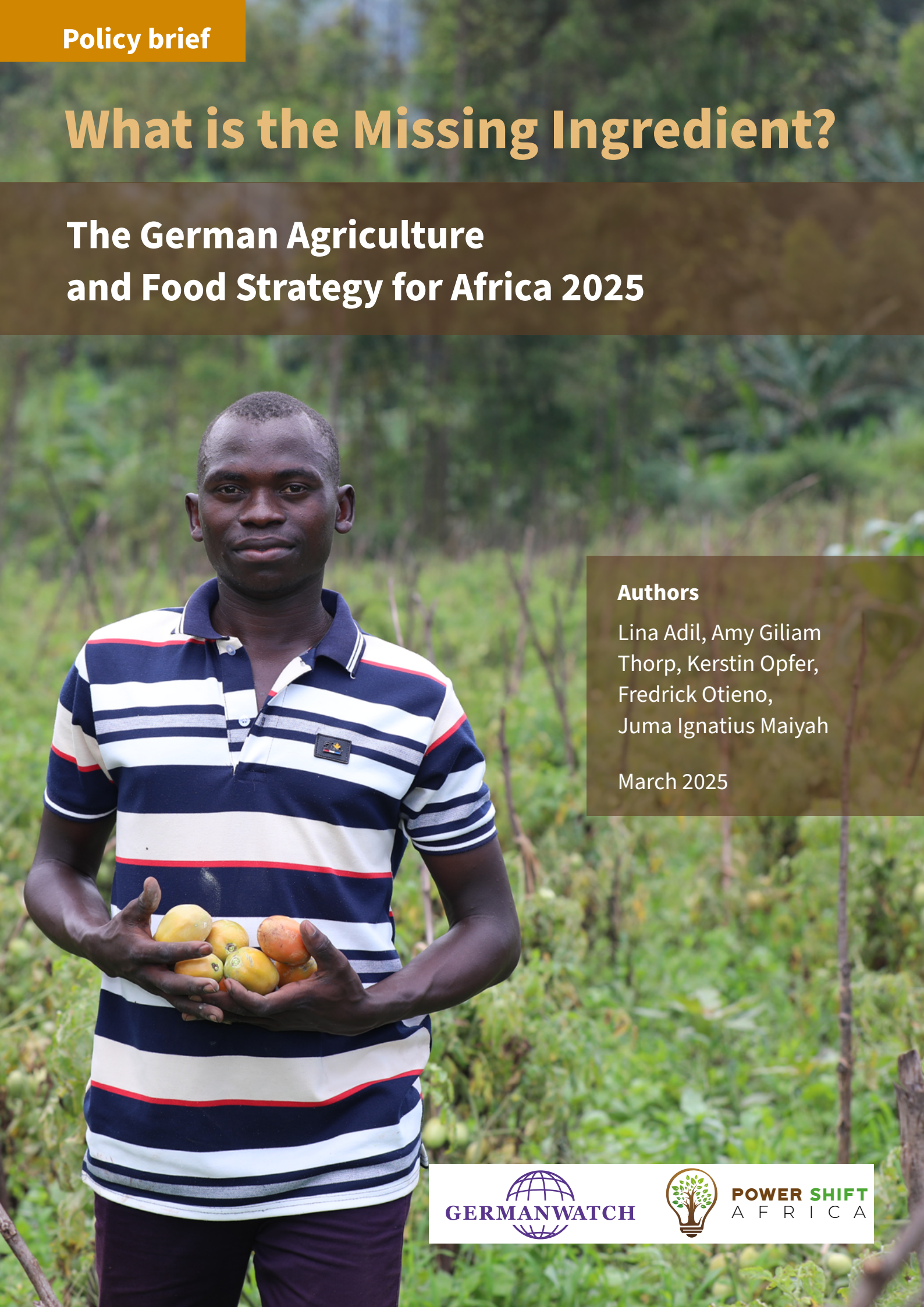
Policy brief

What is the Missing Ingredient?

The German Agriculture and Food Strategy for Africa 2025



Authors

Lina Adil, Amy Giliam Thorp, Kerstin Opfer, Fredrick Otieno, Juma Ignatius Maiyah

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Authors: Lina Adil, Amy Giliam Thorp, Kerstin Opfer, Fredrick Otieno, Juma Ignatius Maiyah

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1 Introduction

In January 2025, the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) updated its strategy and released a new concept for co-operation with African regions and countries. This concept distinguishes itself by rethinking agriculture through empowerment, partnerships, and agroecology, while also aiming to reduce dependencies and to ensure mutual benefits. In this policy paper, we review the updated strategy, highlight its strengths, and suggest areas for improvement. The primary audience for this policy brief includes German and African policymakers, agricultural development practitioners, and trade experts, particularly those involved in Germany's agricultural co-operation with African nations. Additionally, we seek to engage African civil society organisations, farmer movements, and food sovereignty advocates who are directly impacted by food and agricultural strategies.

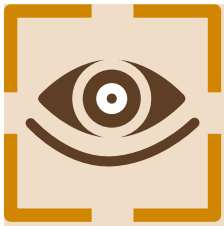
2 Hunger as a status quo

Hunger remains one of the most pressing global challenges, despite nearly 10,000 years of agricultural development. In 2023, 2.33 billion people experienced moderate or severe food insecurity, which amounts to almost 30% of the global population. Africa is disproportionately affected. Nearly 868 million people across the continent faced food insecurity in 2023, including 342 million who suffered from severe hunger. This means that one in five Africans lacked reliable access to food.

These alarming figures persist despite extensive investments in industrialised agriculture. A handful of multinational corporations dominate the global food system, with just four agrochemical companies controlling nearly 70% of the pesticide and seed markets. At the same time, over 80% of the world's poor live and work in rural areas, where small-scale and family farmers account for more than 98% of all farms but control only 53% of agricultural land. Women and youth are particularly disadvantaged, often lacking secure land rights and security of tenure. The increasing concentration of land and corporate power in agriculture has undermined communities – especially in Africa – by limiting their ability to build localised food systems that align with their social and ecological needs. As a result, both planetary health and the livelihoods of small-scale farmers and farmworkers, who play a crucial role in feeding the world, are persistently threatened.

The urgency of these challenges are captured in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement, both of which acknowledge the interdependence of climate action, poverty reduction, and food system transformation, and to which countries have made international commitments to address. Germany wields significant influence and responsibility through its trade relations and development partnerships, particularly with African nations. However, food systems are complex and deeply interconnected, meaning that even well-intentioned policies can have unintended consequences. This was evident in Germany's 2020 Agriculture and Food Cooperation Strategy for Africa, which focused on technical solutions like improving machinery and yields but failed to address deeper structural challenges, such as market inequalities and reliance on export-driven agriculture. Further, by prioritising emerging economies, the strategy overlooked the needs of the most vulnerable countries and people facing severe food insecurity. As a result, it has contributed to reinforcing existing power imbalances rather than fostering long-term resilience and food sovereignty.

1 _ See BMEL, 2025, Konzept für unsere Zusammenarbeit mit afrikanischen Ländern und Regionen (accessed: 13 March 2025)
2 _ See WHO, 2024, Hunger numbers stubbornly high for three consecutive years as global crises deepen: UN report (accessed: 13 March 2025)
3 _ Ibid.
4 _ See Wittman, H., 2023, Food sovereignty: An inclusive model for feeding the world and cooling the planet (accessed: 13 March 2025)
5 _ Ibid.
6 _ See BMEL, n.d., The BMEL's commitment to Africa: ensuring food security and promoting growth (accessed: 13 March 2025)



Focus Box 1: La Via Campesina defines food sovereignty as the right of peoples to:

- define and shape their own food and agriculture;
- to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives;
- to determine the extent of their self-reliance;
- to restrict the dumping of products in their markets; and
- to provide local food producers and users the priority in determining their food systems.

Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather promotes trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to healthy and culturally acceptable food grown through safe and ecologically sustainable practices.[7]

According to the UN, food sovereignty refers to the right of peoples to choose their own food policy. The right of peoples to determine their own policies and methods for sustainable production, distribution and consumption of food, in alignment with their own cultures and systems for managing natural resources and rural areas. It is also considered to be a precondition for food security.[8]

3 Review of the 2025 BMEL Policy

The BMEL strategy aims to present a structured approach to agricultural and food systems co-operation with African partners. It is framed within Germany's Africa policy guidelines and its National Security Strategy and intends to align with principles such as human rights, agroecology, and feminist foreign and development policy. The strategy centres around two focus areas with three objectives each:

I. rethinking agricultural systems via agroecology; promoting organic farming; protecting resources by sustainably using forests and promoting agroforestry;

II. building partnerships with a focus on women, youth, and knowledge sharing; increasing agricultural opportunities through innovation; and strengthening transparent, rules-based trade.

In this policy note, we critically examine the BMEL Africa strategy to identify its strengths and gaps with regards to: climate change (3.1), the systemic causes of hunger (3.2), trade and market structures (3.3), the role of technology, knowledge exchange, capacity building (3.4), and stakeholder participation in policy development (3.5).

3.1 Climate adaptation and mitigation in agricultural and food systems co-operation

The BMEL strategy situates itself within the broader landscape of international sustainability and climate commitments, referencing key frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda, the Kunming –Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and the Paris Agreement. As the BMEL advances its vision for transforming the food and agriculture system, it must explicitly recognise and manage the competing demands on land. Agricultural landscapes play a critical role not only in food production but also in climate action – both mitigation and adaptation – alongside biodiversity protection and land rehabilitation. To achieve a resilient and sustainable future, BMEL must adopt an integrated approach that aligns food security goals with urgent climate priorities.

7 _ See La Via Campesina, n.d., What is food sovereignty? (accessed: 13 March 2025)
8 _ See UNESCWA, n.d., Food sovereignty (accessed: 13 March 2025)

Climate change is intensifying pressures on land. Rising temperatures, shifting precipitation patterns, and extreme weather events threaten agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods. This makes adaptation essential. At the same time, the agriculture and land-use sectors are significant sources of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions but also hold immense potential for carbon sequestration. Effective land management is therefore a key lever for both reducing emissions (mitigation) and enhancing the resilience of food systems (adaptation and disaster risk reduction).

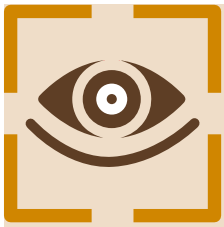
The BMEL strategy could benefit from a stronger focus on the connection between land use and climate action. Failing to account for these interconnected challenges risks trade-offs that undermine long-term sustainability. For example, prioritising food production without climate-adaptive practices could exacerbate soil degradation and emissions, while excessive land set-asides for carbon sequestration could reduce agricultural capacity and food security. The BMEL should embrace a climate-responsive land-use strategy that maximises synergies between agricultural productivity, ecosystem protection, increasing adaptive capacities, and carbon storage.[9]

3.2 Agroecology, food security and food sovereignty

3.2.1 Structural causes of hunger and the limits of food security policies

One of the strengths of the strategy is to recognise the structural causes of hunger in linking food security to social protection and inclusive resource access. The Ministry articulates a commitment to food security, agroecology, and human rights approaches, while acknowledging how German and African interests connect.

The strategy underscores that 'food and agricultural policy is always also security policy'. This positioning agroecology as a tool to reduce dependency and to interrupt post-colonial economic continuities. This framing is important, particularly given Africa's historical experience with externally driven agricultural models that have often reinforced dependencies rather than fostering genuine sovereignty. Without a clear commitment to food sovereignty, the BMEL strategy risks co-opting agroecology into the same economic structures that have undermined African agriculture and marginalised smallholders.



Focus Box 2: A sobering review of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)

The BMZ[10] has invested substantial time and resources into AGRA projects, as EUR 10 million in BMZ investments from 2017 to 2022 into four AGRA projects indicate. However, a civil society evaluation[11;12] of the 2023 mid-term review of BMZ-funded AGRA projects in Ghana and Burkina Faso raised several concerns, particularly about projects' impacts on farmers.

A major criticism was that the AGRA projects would prove unsustainable if farmers did not receive continuous funding and support to access industrial inputs such as chemicals, fertilisers, and GMO[13] seeds. Ultimately, the review implied that farmers were reliant on industries, and consequently that their selection of seeds was limited to commercial portfolios.

The review also echoed farmers' reports on environmental damage related to pesticide use in Burkina Faso. This raises further concerns about the AGRA projects' impacts on farmers' health and on biodiversity.

9 _ See BMEL, 2025, Konzept für unsere Zusammenarbeit mit afrikanischen Ländern und Regionen (accessed: 13 March 2025)
10_ German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.
11_ See Urhahn, J., Koch, J., Ahmad, N., Herre, R., Bollmohr, S., Tanzmann, S., 2023, Déjà Vu: The development approach of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) fails again (accessed: 13 March 2025)
12_ See MDF West Africa, Ocotber 2022, Mid-Term Review of BMZ / KfW-funded AGRA programme in Ghana and Burkina Faso (accessed: 13 March 2025)
13_ Genetically modified organism.

While the strategy acknowledges structural inequalities, it does not fully confront the shortcomings and failures of food security policies in guaranteeing the right to food. The way food security is framed in the document is crucial: while some elements align with food sovereignty, such as those prioritising self-sufficiency and localised food systems, others could reinforce dependencies, particularly market driven solutions. A key barrier to self-sufficiency for instance lies in both historical and contemporary economic structures. Both within African countries and in their respective position in the global economy, achieving true self-sufficiency and agricultural development requires a change of economic frameworks. Historically, the neutrality of a food security focus, particularly if on food availability, has often led to an unjust prioritisation of large-scale corporate driven food systems, market integration, and reliance on external inputs. All of which increases farmers' dependence on chemicals, GMO seeds, and ultimately global supply chains.[14] Some researchers have argued this keeps food insecure communities trapped in growing commodities for the market, rather than growing food for themselves.[15]

***Figure 1:* The complex web of food system activities.**

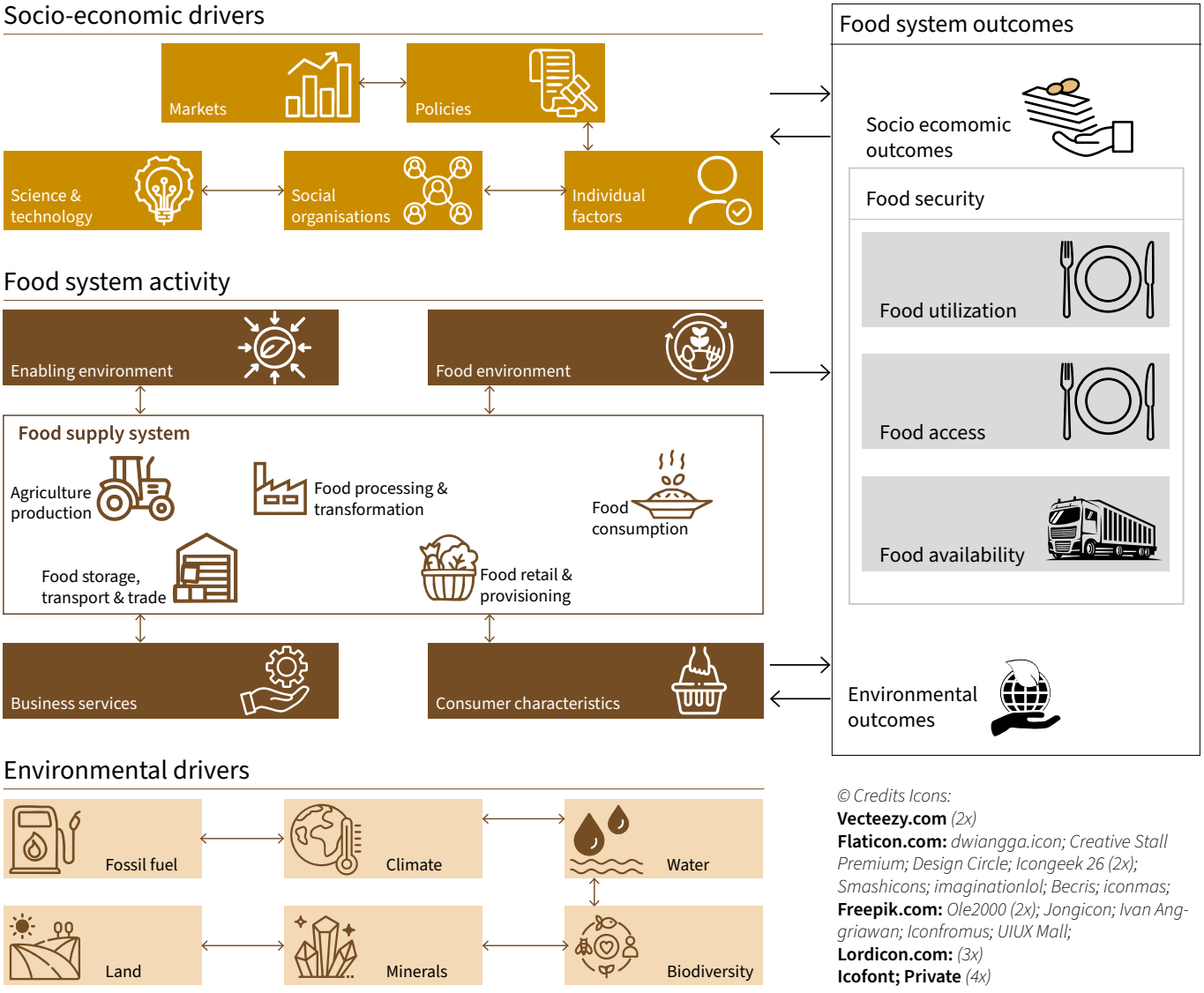


Figure 1: Source: Adapted from Wageningen University.[19]

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14_ See AFSA, 2011, Food Sovereignty Systems: Feeding the World, Regenerating Ecosystems, Rebuilding Local Economies, and Cooling the Planet – all at the same time (accessed: 13 March 2025)
15_ See Gliessman, S., 2024, Moving Africa from food security to food sovereignty (accessed: 13 March 2025)

Many roads lead to food security, and self-sufficiency is one of them. From this perspective, food security and food sovereignty are not inherently opposed. The flaw in the BMEL's food security approach is its failure to explicitly acknowledge power asymmetries in food systems, specifically who controls food production, whose interests shape policies, how food is produced, by whom, or the power imbalances between small-scale farmers and agribusinesses.[16]

A food security approach that prioritises local control over food systems, equitable access to land and resources, and agroecological practices strengthens food sovereignty rather than contradicting it. The BMEL must move beyond a narrow framing of food security by adopting a food systems approach and explicitly incorporating food sovereignty principles to ensure that structural power imbalances are directly confronted, including corporate concentration, land grabs, and unequal trade relations. Without this shift, the strategy risks reinforcing dependencies rather than fostering resilient, self-determined food systems.

As illustrated in ***figure 1***, a food system approach examines the complex web of activities involved in food production, processing, distribution, transportation, and consumption. These activities are also shaped by interactions between social, environmental and economic factors, including governance, markets, policies, climate change, sustainability among others. A food system lens also encompasses the outcomes of these activities in terms of the impact on food security, environmental sustainability, and social-economic welfare.[17] A comprehensive food system lens should integrate both food security and food sovereignty as a broader approach to secure the right to food,[18] recognising that localised, community-led food production strengthens food security while also ensuring long-term resilience and autonomy.

3.2.2 Agroecology and food sovereignty as core concepts

Climate change intensifies extreme weather events that pose severe risks to African food systems, threatening the agricultural sector and key actors such as farmers, women, pastoralists, and the food security at large. In Africa, adopting a food system lens is crucial, as climate vulnerability extends beyond smallholders and agricultural production to urban areas, food supply chains, food retailers, and informal food traders, with far-reaching socio-economic impacts.[20]

Placing agroecology at the heart of the strategy comes as a progressive shift. Agroecology is defined correctly as an 'integrated approach' that incorporates social, economic, and ecological dimensions into agricultural systems, reflected in its 13 principles identified by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food and Nutrition Security (refer to figure 2). What sets agroecology apart is its systems thinking and rights-based approach, which places farmers at the centre and emphasises biodiversity, ecological processes, and local knowledge. Notably, many small-scale farmers in Africa already practice agroecology, demonstrating how it enhances productivity, resilience, and sustainability.[21]

However, the BMEL's strategy falls short by not explicitly recognising agroecology's economic principles and its three core dimensions – as a science, a set of practices, and social movement – as integral to its definition and implementation. Together, these dimensions create a powerful framework for transforming food systems.[23] For instance, agroecology as a science is increasingly integrating diverse knowledge systems, such as Indigenous and traditional knowledge. Importantly, agroecology also serves as the 'practical basis' for food and farmer-led movements.[24] It is crucial to bear in mind that agroecology in developing countries, particularly Africa, is closely linked to the food sovereignty movement, which focuses on local control of food systems, whereas in developed countries, agroecology typically takes shape through farmers' groups focused on sustainable farming practices.[25] Refer to the focus box for case studies highlighting the benefits of agroecology.

16_ See La Via Campesina, October 2021, Food Sovereignty, a Manifesto for the Futur of our Planet (accessed: 17 March 2025)
17_ See Ericksen, P.J., 2008, Conceptualizing food systems for global environmental change research (accessed: 17 March 2025)
18_ See FAO, 2013, Food security and food sovereignty (accessed: 17 March 2025)
19_ See Wageningen University (accessed: 17 March 2025)
20_ See Blekking, J., et.al., 2022, The impacts of climate change and urbanization on food retailers in urban sub-Saharan Africa (accessed: 17 March 2025)
21_ See High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, 2019, Agroecological and other innovative approaches (accessed: 17 March 2025)
22_ See AFSA, n.d., Case Studies of Agroecology (accessed: 17 March 2025)
23_ See Zenda, M., Rudolph, M., 2024, A Systematic Review of Agroecology Strategies for Adapting to Climate Change Impacts on Smallholder Crop Farmers' Livelihoods in South Africa (accessed: 17 March 2025)
24_ See Silici, L., 2014, Agroecology – What it is and what is has to offer (accessed: 17 March 2025)
25_ Ibid.

Focus box 3: Benefits of agroecology

Case studies in the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa's repository of agroecology demonstrate how agroecology enhances food security, boosts incomes, builds climate resilience, restores ecosystems, and strengthens local communities, all while being cost-effective and sustainable.[26]

Case study highlights:

- **Tigray, Ethiopia:** Once facing severe drought, deforestation, and land degradation, the village of **Abreha We Atsbeha** was on the brink of collapse, with declining crop yields and widespread poverty. Through agroecological practices and community-led landscape restoration, **69% of land has been rehabilitated,** groundwater levels have risen, and food security has drastically improved. Crop production has tripled, soil loss has been reduced by 80%, and incomes have increased. Agroecology also has important social development benefits: women now have better access to water and firewood, and youth take local job opportunities, reversing migration trends.[27]

- **Kisumu, Kenya:** Farmers in Kisumu West live on the frontlines of the climate crisis. **Poor soil fertility, erratic rainfall, and destructive windstorms** have frequently led to crop failures, food insecurity, and deepening poverty. Since adopting agroecological techniques, over **1,500 farmers** have seen maize yields **increase from 4 to 13 bags per farmer,** and **household incomes rise by 30%.** Soil conservation practices, agroforestry, and organic fertilisers have restored degraded land, making farms more resilient to droughts and windstorms. Peer-to-peer learning has driven rapid adoption, strengthening food sovereignty in the region.[28]

These success stories demonstrate agroecology's potential to ensure a sustainable and food-secure future by supporting communities in their struggle to adapt and build resilience to climate change.

a. Food Sovereignty: A people-centred alternative to industrial food systems

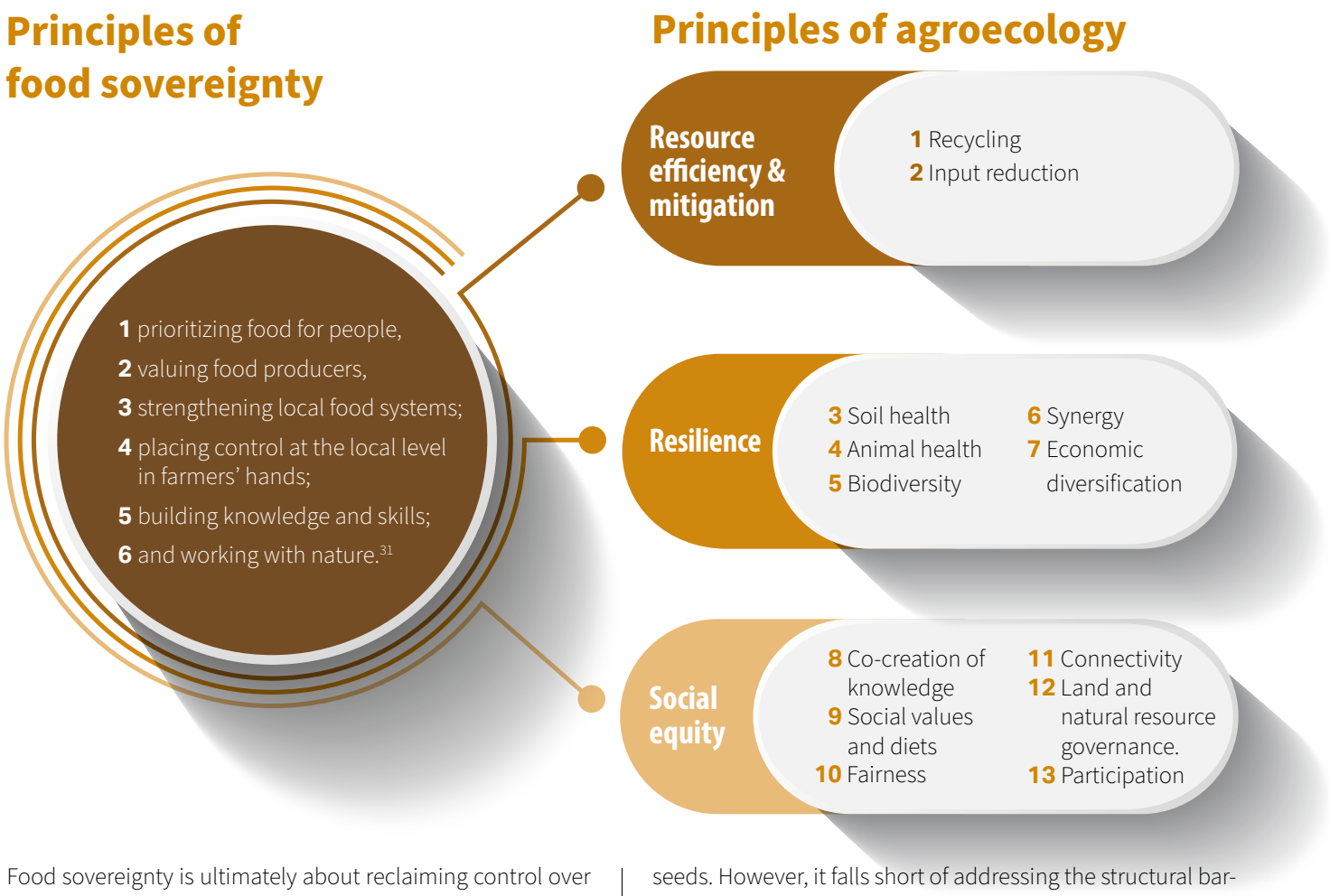
The BMEL strategy references food sovereignty, but fails to integrate it as a core pillar. Instead, the Ministry cursorily mentions food sovereignty in a focus box, where it is framed merely as an alternative to industrial agriculture rather than a fundamental principle. This raises concerns about the extent to which the strategy will eventually empower African countries to shape their agricultural policies independently.

As it stands, the strategy's suggested method to reduce reliance on imports is to increase production, which aligns with the Dakar 2 Declaration but has been contested by African civil society groups.[29] These groups have argued that food sovereignty goes beyond merely boosting domestic production. Greater national self-sufficiency and productivity are certainly important but not enough. Rather, these goals must align with the broader vision of food sovereignty, which seeks to recast the foundation of food and agricultural systems, as mentioned above.

In line with agroecology principles, food sovereignty envisions an alternative to unequal, unjust, and unsustainable food systems,[30] rooted in six key principles (see ***figure 2***):

26_ See AFSA, n.d., Case Studies of Agroecology (accessed: 17 March 2025)
27_ See AFSA, n.d., Landscape Renaissance: The Ethiopian village reversing degradation and drought (accessed: 17 March 2025)
28_ See AFSA, n.d., Kenyan farmers triumph over climate adversity with agroecological practices (accessed: 17 March 2025)
29_ See AFSA, February 2023, AFSA Statement on AfDB's Dakar 2 Food Summit (accessed: 17 March 2025)
30_ See AFSA, n.d., Food Sovereignty Systems: Feeding the World, Regenerating Ecosystems, Rebuilding Local Economies, and Colling the Planet – all at the same time (accessed: 17 March 2025)
31_ Ibid.

Figure 2: **Food Sovereignty and Agroecology - Principles for a Just and Sustainable Food System.**



Food sovereignty is ultimately about reclaiming control over food production, distribution and decision-making, enabling farmers and communities to prioritise local needs. Unlike food security, food sovereignty claims the right of people to define their food and seed systems, and unshackles them from external markets and inputs. Achieving food sovereignty thus entails challenging dominant agribusinesses and industrial food systems, which are known to frequently exploit both farmers and the environment. Autonomy, social justice, and gender equity are at the heart of food sovereignty.[32]

b.Seed Sovereignty: Protecting farmers' rights and crop diversity

Crop diversity and seed sovereignty are critical aspects of both agroecology and food sovereignty. The strategy rightly acknowledges the importance of traditional and Indigenous crops in promoting culturally appropriate diets and the need to conserve genetic resources and ensure farmers' access to seeds. However, it falls short of addressing the structural barriers that threaten farmers' control over seeds.

Since seeds are fundamental to agriculture, true food sovereignty must also include seed sovereignty. Corporate monopolies, transgenic crops, and global intellectual property laws have eroded seed sovereignty, restricting farmers' ability to save, exchange, and reproduce seeds. Instead of prioritising staple and Indigenous crops needed to combat hunger, many African governments focus on cash crops such as coffee, strawberries, and cotton to cater to international markets. African governments are not simply prioritising cash crops at the expense of food sovereignty; they are responding to global market demands and seeking to leverage agriculture for economic development. Nevertheless, this market-driven approach often marginalises small and medium-scale farmers, forcing them to comply with national regulations and incentives that contradict their traditional, inherited farming

32_ See La Via Campesina, October 2021, Food Sovereignty, a Manifesto for the Futur of our Planet (accessed: 17 March 2025)

knowledge. It also deepens existing trade inequalities, undermines their right to produce food based on local needs and hinders supplying local markets with nutritional food.

Recent studies have highlighted how community seed banks in Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire, Bangladesh, and India help farmers regain control over seeds, conserve local crop varieties, and strengthen co-operation with researchers, which contributes to food and seed sovereignty.[33] At the national level, governments of India, Bangladesh, and Zimbabwe have implemented measures to protect traditional knowledge related to genetic resources and farmers' seed systems, demonstrating the crucial role of policy interventions in supporting food sovereignty.

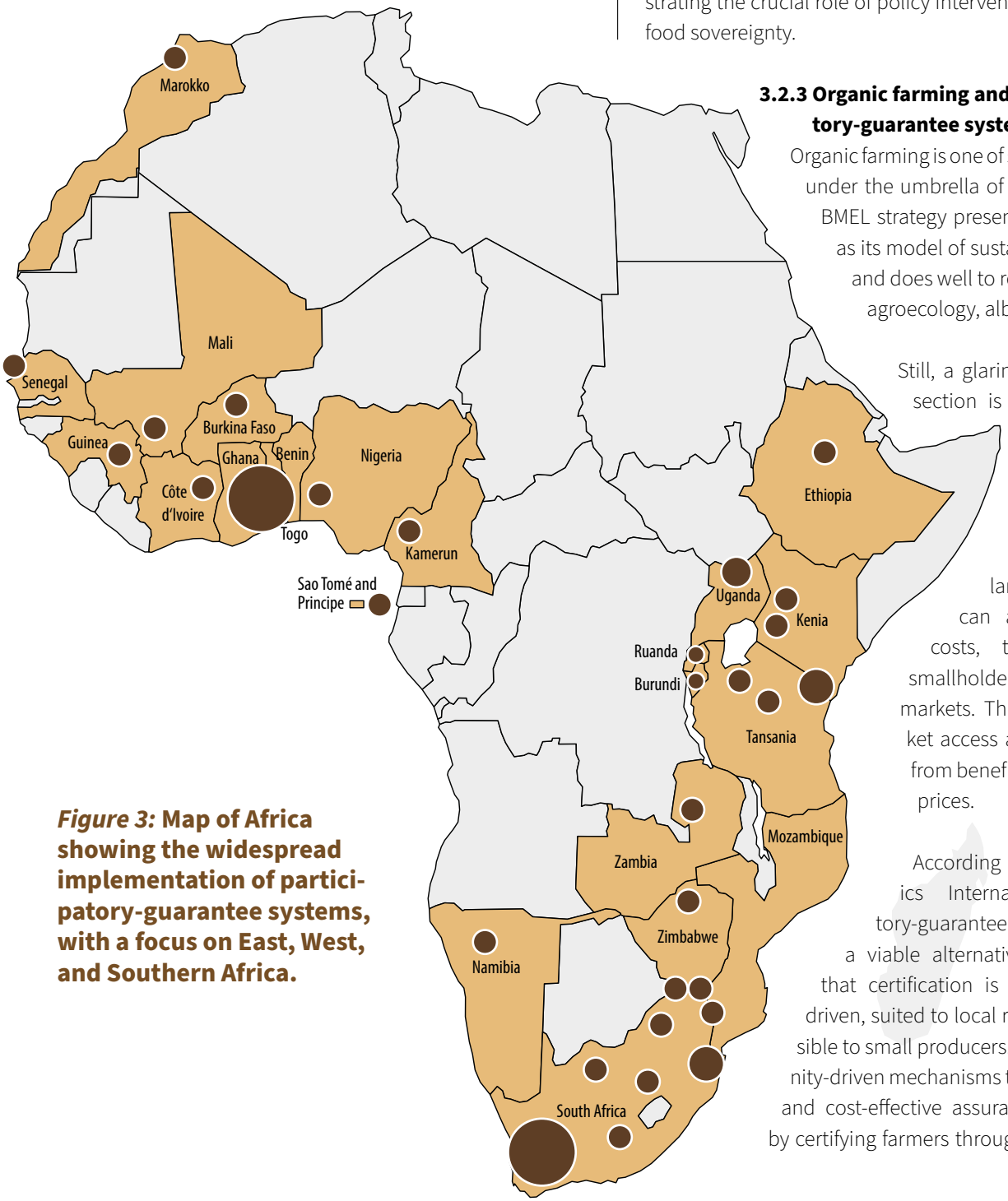


Figure 3: **Map of Africa showing the widespread implementation of participatory-guarantee systems, with a focus on East, West, and Southern Africa.**

3.2.3 Organic farming and participatory-guarantee systems

Organic farming is one of several approaches under the umbrella of agroecology.[34] The BMEL strategy presents organic farming as its model of sustainable agriculture, and does well to recognise the link to agroecology, albeit briefly.

Still, a glaring omission in this section is the high costs of organic certification, especially in Africa.[35] Certification schemes tend to favour larger producers who can afford compliance costs, thereby excluding smallholders from premium markets. This limits their market access and prevents them from benefiting from premium prices.

According to IFOAM-Organics International, participatory-guarantee systems (PGS) are a viable alternative, which ensures that certification is farmer-led, locally driven, suited to local realities, and accessible to small producers.[36] PGS are community-driven mechanisms that provide quality and cost-effective assurance to consumers by certifying farmers through stakeholder par-

33_ See Vernooy, R., et.al., 2020, The role of community seed bank in achieving farmers' rights (accessed: 17 March 2025)
34_ See Silici, L., 2014, Agroecology – What it is and what is has to offer (accessed: 17 March 2025)
35_ See IFOAM Organics International, n.d., Organic in Africa (accessed: 17 March 2025)
36_ See IFOAM Organics International, n.d., Participatory Guarantee Systems (accessed: 17 March 2025)

ticipation, relying on trust, social networks, and knowledge sharing to ensure compliance with agreed organic principles.[37] Importantly, the potential of PGS is that they are not inherently linked to premium markets or higher prices, making them more suitable for farmers and consumers. The focus on sustaining local markets contributes to addressing the right to food and building more resilient local supply chains, as opposed to being export-oriented. As this map of Africa illustrates (see ***figure 3***),[38] multiple participatory-guarantee systems are already established and in operation across Africa, particularly in East, West, and Southern Africa.

Equally important yet missing from the strategy is a reference to the Knowledge Centre for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Africa, which is commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and managed by the German International Cooperation Society (GIZ).[39] It is made up of five regional knowledge hubs, which provide access to resources, capacity building, and knowledge sharing on agroecology and organic agriculture. These hubs could serve as a vital contact to support the expansion of PGS and for implementation of the BMEL strategy.

3.2.4 Agroforestry and land rights

The strategy promotes agroforestry, acknowledging its role in soil health, biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation and mitigation. However, the separate section on agroforestry suggests the BMEL treats agroforestry as a standalone solution, rather than a component of agroecology practices.

The strategy should explicitly frame agroforestry as one of many agroecological practices that collectively drive the transition to more sustainable and resilient food systems, to strengthen strategic coherence. Additionally, the strategy should link its discussion on land access challenges with the growing pressure on land from energy, food production, forest protection, and more. Agroforestry alleviates these competing demands for land by combining tree planting with food production. Supporting land rights and land use planning efforts would be instrumental to agroforestry initiatives. By making these connections clearer, the strategy would better reflect the systemic nature of agroecology and the structural barriers that must be addressed to ensure its successful implementation.

3.3 Agricultural Trade and market structures

The BMEL strategy rightly focuses on transforming agri-food systems by promoting agroecology, in particular organic farming, but its practical success hinges on how well it balances market-driven approaches with locally driven solutions.

It is crucial to consider the historical and global trade rules that have led to Africa dependence on food imports. A staggering 85% of its food is imported.[40] Policies dating back to the 1960s are reinforcing the production of complementary crops rather than core crops, pushing African nations to adopt non-native seeds and practices that catered to foreign markets rather than local needs. Competing priorities between economic demands (such as servicing debt), climate goals (such as reducing vulnerabilities and cutting emissions), and development goals (such as achieving food sovereignty) pose significant challenges for the food and agriculture sector in Africa.

To address Africa's agricultural challenges effectively, it is essential to recognize the interconnectedness of various factors and contexts, e.g., historical trade policies, and the broader economic pressures facing the continent. For instance, the Africa strategy correctly identifies nutrient depletion as a key challenge for African agriculture, citing the low use of fertilisers compared to global averages. However, its framing of fertiliser use as primarily a cost and availability issue oversimplifies a more complex structural debate. The reliance on imported fertilisers has long been a lever of control within global agricultural trade systems, and civil society groups have consistently argued that agroecological methods, including composting, crop rotation, and Indigenous soil regeneration techniques, offer more sustainable and non-debt generating pathways than chemically intensive solutions. The absence of a deeper discussion on the political economy of fertilisers, particularly on the role of multinational agribusinesses, subsidy regimes, and the broader WTO agricultural trade frameworks, limits the strategy's capacity to address systemic issues.

37_ See IFOAM Organics International, 2019, PGS Guidelines: How to Develop and Manage Participatory Guarantee Systems for Organic Agriculture (accessed: 17 March 2025)
38_ See IFOAM Organics International, n.d., Participatory Guarantee Systems Worldwide (accessed: 17 March 2025)
39_ See Knowledge Platform for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Africa, n.d., We Transform Agriculture Across Africa (accessed: 17 March 2025)
40_ See Akiwumi, P. (UNCTAD), August 2020, Covid-19: A threat to food security in Africa (accessed: 17 March 2025)

On animal husbandry, the strategy rightly acknowledges that poultry exports from the EU to African countries are often debated in terms of their impact on local markets, the strategy leans on research suggesting that imports do not necessarily prevent the development of domestic poultry production. However, this interpretation is highly contested. Other studies,[41] on Senegal's poultry sector, for example, suggest that complete import bans have significantly improved domestic production, contradicting the assumption that liberalised trade always leads to positive outcomes. The fact that different African governments have taken divergent policy approaches (some imposing import restrictions while others maintain low tariffs) illustrates the broader issue at play: trade policy is not neutral, and African states must navigate between developmental needs and external economic pressures. The BMEL strategy does not sufficiently engage with the long-term implications of European agricultural exports on African economies, particularly in relation to local value chains, rural employment, and food system resilience.

A similar dynamic plays out in addressing the broader agricultural trade component, where the strategy downplays the structural imbalances that shape Africa's position in global markets. By suggesting that limiting imports does not necessarily harm agricultural development, the strategy overlooks critical asymmetries such as the differences in production models, subsidies, and market access that tilt the playing field in favour of wealthier economies. It also fails to account for environmental concerns, including the carbon footprint of an export/import oriented food system. Moreover, the strategy does not engage with the infrastructural constraints that continue to hinder Africa's local and regional agricultural trade. For example, the colonial-era transport networks were designed to extract raw materials rather than facilitate domestic food distribution, leaving smallholder farmers disconnected from key markets. While African governments bear responsibility for addressing these gaps, the structural legacy remains. Without recognising the need for investments that prioritise localised trade and farmer-led food systems, the strategy risks reinforcing dependencies rather than fostering long-term resilience.

3.4 Technology, knowledge exchange, and capacity building

The BMEL strategy highlights mechanisation and digitalisation of agriculture as critical tools to facilitate change in African food and agriculture systems. While digital innovations hold promise for enhancing efficiency and access to information in African agriculture, they are not a panacea for the deeper structural and production challenges facing the sector. Increasing digitalisation – through mobile-based advisory services, precision farming technologies, and digital marketplaces – is often presented as a transformative solution. However, without addressing the underlying systemic issues, its impact will remain limited.

Many of the most pressing challenges in African agriculture are deeply rooted in structural constraints, such as insecure land tenure, limited access to finance, degraded soils, inadequate infrastructure, and vulnerability to climate change. Digital tools can improve information flows and market linkages, but they cannot substitute for investments in resilient production systems, equitable land policies, and robust rural development strategies.

Moreover, digital solutions often assume a level of connectivity, literacy, and affordability that does not reflect the realities of many smallholder farmers. Without addressing these gaps, digitalisation risks reinforcing existing inequalities, where only those with access to technology and capital benefit, leaving the most vulnerable further behind.

Digitalisation and mechanisation must be designed and disseminated to support small-scale farmers to contribute meaningfully to agricultural transformation, rather than reinforcing corporate control over data, machinery, and inputs. Furthermore, genuine support for sovereignty in agricultural production in Africa must include local agricultural equipment manufacturing and maintenance. The strategy does not adequately provide for supporting local innovation including prototyping and manufacturing of farm equipment within the continent. Imperatively, Africa has to import foreign-designed finished equipment or components for assembling. This would deny the continent a chance for a thriving and locally relevant agro-technology sector to support improved productivity. Without local machinery manufacturing and ownership of backbone technologies used in their manu-

41_ See Zamani, O. Chibanda, C., Pelikan, J., 2023, Unraveling the effects of import bans on domestic poultry production: a case study of Senegal (accessed: 17 March 2025)

facturing in Africa, imbalance of payments would persist as countries end up spending more to import machinery than they get back from agricultural exports.

Digital platforms and mechanised solutions are often introduced without sufficient consultation and input from farmers, especially women, and other key food system actors (e.g. informal food traders) about their needs, access constraints, and local knowledge systems.[42] It is crucial for the BMEL strategy to recognise and understand the political-economic dynamics underpinning the digitalisation of food and agriculture systems, along with distribution and uptake of technology among food system actors in the African context. If not implemented equitably or with consideration of the inherent power dynamics, such approaches could deepen existing inequalities by benefitting and placing further control in the hands of large agribusinesses, while excluding small-scale farmers and small business operators who lack financial resources to access new technologies.

On knowledge systems, the strategy rightfully course-corrects the dominant narrative towards a more decolonial framing of knowledge, focusing on empowerment, dialogue, and exchange. Transforming knowledge and the ways of knowing are an integral part of a much deeper process of systemic change. Research and data on food and agriculture still remain largely dominated by the Global North.[43] Knowledge plays a crucial role in shaping development – not only by driving technological advancements but also by shaping values and assumptions that inspire individuals and influence policy decisions.[44] Africa has a vast, though often undocumented, reservoir of traditional agricultural practices, local innovations, and context-specific wisdom that have long been overlooked in mainstream development strategies. These Indigenous systems are often more adaptable and better suited to local environmental and social contexts than externally imposed technologies.

3.5 Participatory and inclusive policy development

A key strength of the BMEL's approach lies in its transition from 'a concept for Africa' to 'a concept with Africa', highlighting mutual learning and alignment with African priorities and needs. By championing a multi-stakeholder approach, the BMEL acknowledges that a just and sustainable agricultural future requires collaborative efforts among governments, civil society, and international partners. This inclusive perspective is essential, as it underscores the shared responsibility in tackling food security and sustainable development challenges.

The BMEL's focus on participatory policymaking and multi-stakeholder engagement further enhances this approach. A genuinely participatory process ensures that policies are informed by a comprehensive understanding of local contexts, effectively addressing the needs and priorities of African stakeholders while preventing external interests from steering development agendas. However, participation often becomes a mere procedural formality or, at worst, an exercise in symbolic engagement. Further, although multi-stakeholder processes are often designed to bring diverse voices together, they can implicitly assume equality among participants, overlooking significant power imbalances. A national industry association and a smallholder farmer co-operative, for example, may formally sit at the same table, yet their influence, resources, and access to decision-making differ vastly. Without intentional safeguards, these disparities can marginalise the voices of less powerful actors, reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

To ensure genuinely inclusive and fair processes, specific measures are needed to elevate and integrate the perspectives of marginalised groups. This aligns with principles of procedural justice – ensuring fair and equitable participation in decision-making – and recognitive justice, which acknowledges and values the unique experiences, knowledge, and rights of historically disadvantaged actors. Concrete steps include capacity-building support for smaller stakeholders, targeted facilitation to balance discussions, and mechanisms that translate participation into meaningful influence. Ensuring meaningful and effective multi-stakeholder involvement demands concerted efforts to foster inclusivity, transparency,

42_ See Belay, M., 2024, Africa's Agricultural Future Lies in Agroecology (accessed: 17 March 2025)
43_ See Pinheiro, A., Govind, M., 2020, Emerging Global Trends in Urban Agriculture Research: A Scientometric Analysis of Peer-reviewed Journals (accessed: 17 March 2025)
44_ See Pimbert, M. (IIED), 2006, Transforming Knowledge and Ways of Knowing for Food Sovereignty (accessed: 17 March 2025)

and genuine collaboration. Therefore, the BMEL should implement mechanisms that reinforce accountability, secure fair representation of smallholder farmers, especially women, and emphasise African-led solutions to agricultural development. Without such efforts, multi-stakeholder engagement risks becoming a platform that amplifies dominant voices rather than fostering truly just and transformative change.

Despite recognising structural inequalities, the strategy falls short of adequately addressing the persistent impact of colonial legacies on African agricultural systems. The historical restructuring of African agriculture to serve colonial interests has resulted in lasting imbalances, with export-oriented cash crops such as coffee, cocoa, and cotton taking precedence over local food production. This shift has disrupted traditional agricultural practices, degraded soil fertility, and increased vulnerability to external shocks. Additionally, African agricultural exports remain restricted by value chain controls dominated by foreign entities, limiting the continent's leverage in international markets. Agricultural subsidies in developed nations further distort trade, exacerbating disadvantages for African producers. Comparable structural barriers exist in land tenure systems, market access, and agricultural research, all of which necessitate targeted policy interventions.

Moreover, true transformation requires shifting away from an aid-based relationship that frames Africa as a passive recipient in need of external intervention. Instead, genuine co-operation should be the cornerstone of the strategy, harnessing existing synergies and local expertise. The co-creation of the BMEL Africa Strategy 2025 marks a positive step forward, but further efforts are necessary to critically engage with prevailing power dynamics and structural inequalities.

4 Recommendations

The BMEL can play a transformative role in fostering sustainable and just food systems across the African continent by shifting the policy focus on externally driven agricultural interventions to participation and sovereignty. We suggest ten improvements to the Africa strategy to achieve this.

1 **A roadmap for operationalisation:** The strategy marks a conceptual shift from the previous BMEL strategy, with its emphasis on frameworks and approaches to advance agricultural development in Africa. Clarity on how these new concepts integrate with both existing and new initiatives will be critical to ensure that the conceptual shift translates into action. As a next step, the BMEL should specify with an actionable roadmap how the newly introduced concepts will be adapted and applied to the ongoing initiatives to ensure alignment with the strategy's updated vision. This roadmap should also detail the first steps for new initiatives and programmes, with clear timelines, resource allocation, and measurable performance indicators.

2 **Bolster climate adaptation and mitigation in the agricultural and food systems thinking.** Frameworks such as National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) should be considered during the strategy's implementation. Further, by addressing the competing demands on land, the BMEL can optimise synergies between food production, climate action, and biodiversity conservation to enable long-term sustainability.

3 **Strengthen the conceptual role of agroecology and food sovereignty:** The strategy's food security approach has a narrow focus on food availability and accessibility. This offers little support to Africa in addressing the structural causes of hunger and transforming unjust, unsustainable food systems. Agroecology – as a science, set of practices, and movement – would follow a food systems and food sovereignty approach, which addresses the root causes rather than the symptoms of food insecurity. To ensure coherence with the core principles of agroecology, the BMEL

strategy must explicitly adopt food sovereignty, alongside food security, as part of a broader approach to secure the right to food. Further, the strategy should expand its conceptualisation of food sovereignty, drawing on the principles and elaboration provided in this policy note, to better reflect support for African farmers' rights, autonomy, social justice, and their diverse realities.

4 **Support the expansion of PGS for market access:** To support and increase small-scale farmers practising agroecology, including organic farming, the BMEL should collaborate with small-scale farmers and the BMZ-commissioned organic knowledge hubs across Africa to establish and expand PSGs, especially in North and Central Africa. PGS empower farmers' by amplifying their voice when it comes to setting standards and defining certification processes. PGS also reduce certification costs, and help certified farmers connect to markets, enhancing resilience and promoting food sovereignty across Africa.

5 **Support land reforms aligned with agroecological principles:** To address the lasting impacts of postcolonial land structures, the BMEL should facilitate knowledge sharing and global research on best practices for land reforms that enhance both economic and social viability. These reforms should maximise the productivity of Africa's vast arable land while remaining consistent with agroecological principles. Additionally, the BMEL could play a key role in supporting land use planning exercises that bring together diverse stakeholders to identify non-forested areas that could be used for agriculture, forested areas in need of reforestation or protection.[45] Supporting inclusive and transparent governance structures with meaningful participation from all stakeholders will ensure long-term sustainability and local ownership of land use policies.

6 **Strengthen African-led agri-food systems and market integration:** The BMEL should prioritise support for African-led entities in the agri-food value chain by investing in capacity building, fostering intra-African market integration (e.g., the African Common Market), increasing small-scale farmers' access to markets, and strengthening rural infrastructure. A key aspect of this is the promotion of territorial markets, which are not only crucial for food sovereignty but also serve as vital sources of livelihoods and economic development, particularly in rural areas. Strengthening these markets will empower local producers, enhance regional trade, and contribute to more resilient food systems. Investments should focus on aggregation facilities, renewable energy-powered cooling systems to reduce post-harvest losses, and the development of symbiotic agro-processing industries. Additionally, while youth and women are often positioned primarily as economic drivers, it is essential to also recognise their political agency and the structural barriers they face. Addressing these challenges through inclusive policies and targeted support mechanisms will ensure that agricultural transformation is both equitable and sustainable. These initiatives will enhance food security, increase value addition within Africa, and reduce reliance on external markets, creating a more self-sufficient and resilient agri-food system.

7 **Confront the structural inequities embedded in the global agricultural trade** by prioritising policies that strengthen Africa's food sovereignty rather than perpetuate dependence on external market. To counteract the historical and current disadvantages created by the global agricultural subsidies, the strategy should aim to support and protect local farmers from unfair competition and support policy processes and practices towards protection of territorial markets.

8 **Support a more grounded and inclusive approach centred on creating genuine, collaborative knowledge ecosystems,** where local knowledge is appreciated and integrated with research to co-create solutions that are both sustainable and relevant. As seen in other successful cases globally, this requires not only recognising the value of local expertise but also creating formal spaces for local stakeholders to influence research agendas. The strategy could further strengthen this by establishing participatory knowledge platforms that bridge the gap between local knowledge and the scientific approach, such as community-led research councils or dialogue forums, where farmers, scientists, and policymakers engage in ongoing conversations to jointly identify challenges and develop solutions.

45_ See Oosthuyse, J., Giliam, A., 2021, A people-centred approach to managing Africa's forests as a carbon sink (accessed 17 March 2025)

9 **Ensure genuine African ownership:** The BMEL must ensure African leadership by supporting African countries in developing their agricultural sectors in alignment with their national development priorities. Rather than imposing external solutions, the BMEL should adapt its support to fit within African-led, African-owned initiatives and programmes that prioritise local expertise, sovereignty, and long-term sustainability. Importantly, co-operation should be rooted in transparency, mutual accountability, and reciprocity. All partners must commit to making relevant information publicly available, actively involving key stakeholders, and utilising African-led monitoring systems to assess impact. This ensures that development efforts are not externally driven but rather co-created and responsive to local needs.

10 **Foster inclusive and equitable participation in agricultural development:** The BMEL should ensure that all stakeholders can actively participate in agricultural policy and development initiatives, regardless of power dynamics, language barriers, digital literacy, or resource limitations. To achieve this, the BMEL must support the creation of diverse engagement formats, including in-person consultations, capacity-building workshops, and culturally relevant dialogue platforms. Particular attention should be given to marginalised groups, such as smallholder farmers, women, and youth, ensuring they are not just included but actively empowered through targeted skills training, literacy programmes, and leadership development initiatives. Participation should not be limited to the early stages of policy consultations but should extend throughout the entire process – from policy design and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. Strengthening grassroots structures, such as agri-food co-operatives, can serve as an effective mechanism to institutionalise long-term community participation and ensure that local voices are represented in decision-making. Additionally, addressing systemic power imbalances within the agricultural sector requires prioritising women's and youth empowerment from the outset. The BMEL should actively promote the integration of women into agricultural projects to prevent economic benefits from remaining concentrated in male-dominated structures. Providing women and youth with access to financial resources, technical training, and leadership opportunities will help foster economic independence and innovation in the agricultural sector. By taking these steps, the BMEL can contribute to a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient agricultural landscape in Africa.

The BMEL strategy has the potential to play a pivotal role in advancing sustainable and equitable food systems across Africa. At its core, this would involve actively supporting food sovereignty, ensuring that African communities have the autonomy and resources to shape their own food systems. While the strategy provides a strong foundation, its success will depend on translating its principles into practical, scalable, inclusive, and locally-driven solutions. By refining key areas such as strengthening agroecological practices, integrating climate action, and prioritizing African-led initiatives, BMEL can create the necessary conditions for more resilient and self-sufficient food systems. In doing so, it can tackle immediate challenges while fostering long-term, locally-owned agricultural solutions.

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