



Faith, food and the future:

Policy pathways for ecological justice
through indigenous food systems



A Policy Review

Contents

Introduction	3
Why indigenous food systems matter	3
Nutrition and food security	3
Climate resilience and biodiversity	4
Cultural and spiritual significance	4
The policy crossroads: frameworks that help or harm	4
Supportive international and regional frameworks to leverage	4
Restrictive frameworks undermining indigenous food systems	5
Recommendations: from local fields to regional platforms	6
Recommendations for policymakers	6
Recommendations for faith leaders and eco-communities	6
Reclaiming the future through indigenous food systems	7
References	7

List of acronyms

AFSA	Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa
SAFCEI	Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute
UPOV	International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants

About this paper

This paper builds on the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute's (SAFCEI's) 2025 *Faith, food and the future: Indigenous food systems for climate and community resilience* publication to advocate for policy frameworks that are supportive or detrimental to indigenous food systems, which are critical for preserving and enhancing biodiversity, contributing towards food and nutritional security and sovereignty and building climate resilience in an inclusive and just way. These systems play a key role in culture, identity and spiritual practice; they have for centuries helped to maintain relationships within the community of life on Earth. This is the second document in a series of three reports on *Faith, food and the future*: Research report, Policy recommendations and Examples of indigenous foods.

Special thanks and acknowledgement to Claire Roussel for participatory research with faith leaders and experiential research at the 2024 Amadiba indigenous seed and food festival, forming the basis of the earlier working paper on which this study builds, for her drawings and illustrations. We also thank Stefanie Swanepoel for bringing all the initial research together, her further research, and the grounding of this paper in science and faith, as well as for her editing work. We are grateful for the active participation of faith leaders in this study, who generously shared their time and knowledge.

Citation

Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute [SAFCEI]. 2025. *Faith, food and the future: Policy pathways for ecological justice through indigenous food systems*. Cape Town: SAFCEI.

Introduction

Southern Africa faces converging crises of climate change, hunger, biodiversity loss and the erosion of traditional farming knowledge. Industrial agriculture and extractive economies, rooted in narrow ideas of 'modernisation' and 'progress,' have displaced smallholder farmers, degraded ecosystems and weakened the spiritual and cultural ties between people, land, seed and community. Yet, within the soils of this region lie seeds of resilience. Indigenous food systems, blending ancestral farming knowledge, diverse local crops, seed saving, agroecological practices and spiritual traditions, offer a pathway towards ecological justice, climate adaptation and food sovereignty.

Indigenous food systems include both indigenous foods originating in Africa, such as baobab, marula, sorghum, finger millet and cowpeas, cultivated or foraged for centuries and carrying deep ecological, cultural and spiritual meaning (Akinola et al. 2021) and traditional foods, which include indigenous foods, but also include foods like maize, cassava, sweet potato and mung beans, which were introduced through trade, migration or colonisation and have over generations become woven into local diets, seed-saving traditions and farming systems

(Akinola et al. 2021). These foods have been naturalised, are adaptive to local ecological conditions and able to sustain themselves without humans.

Together, these foods and the knowledge that accompanies them sustain ecosystems, farming practices, cultural identity, nutrition, health and spiritual ceremonies—forming the backbone of agroecological systems that value diversity, soil health, low external inputs, local economies and intergenerational knowledge (van Zonneveld et al. 2023). But centuries of colonialism, monoculture expansion and restrictive seed laws have marginalised indigenous foods, labelling them as 'backward' or 'poor man's food' while diverting funds, research and markets towards industrial crops and commercial seed systems (Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa [AFSA], 2021).

In a time of industrial farming, integrating food systems into national, regional and global policy frameworks is no longer optional—it is a moral, ecological and food security imperative.

Why indigenous food systems matter

Nutrition and food security

Indigenous and traditional food species in Africa provide higher levels of protein, vitamins and minerals than staples like maize, wheat and rice (Mgwenya et al. 2025). Supplying essential amino acids, antioxidants and bioactive compounds, these crops are vital for combating malnutrition, non-communicable diseases and hidden hunger (Akinola et al. 2020).



Climate resilience and biodiversity

Drought-tolerant, low-input crops like sorghum, millet, cowpea, amaranth, moringa and marula enhance biodiversity and soil fertility through intercropping, rotation, seed saving and agroforestry (Mgwenya et al. 2025). By preserving genetic diversity and ecosystem health, indigenous food systems reduce vulnerability to climate shocks, pests and diseases while supporting soil, water and carbon stewardship (van Zonneveld et al. 2023).

Cultural and spiritual significance

Faith leaders describe indigenous foods as “seeds of continuity passed through generations” and “foods rooted in the wisdom of elders who understand soils, water and ecological health”. From rain-petitioning ceremonies to ancestral offerings with sorghum beer, these foods carry sacred meaning, linking nourishment with ritual, identity and spiritual stewardship.

The policy crossroads: frameworks that help or harm

Policy frameworks shape whether indigenous food systems flourish or vanish. Supportive instruments already exist but remain underused, while restrictive intellectual property regimes, regional and international seed harmonisation policies risk eroding farmers’ rights, biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Supportive international and regional frameworks to leverage

- **Convention on Biological Diversity (1992):** Recognises indigenous agricultural practices, traditional knowledge and biodiversity conservation.
- **Food and Agriculture Organization’s International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (2001)** safeguards Farmers’ Rights to save, exchange and use indigenous and traditional seeds and Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food (2004) promotes culturally appropriate diets and traditional food practices.
- **United Nations Declarations on Indigenous Peoples (2007) and Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People in Rural Areas (2018):** Protects rights to land, resources, food sovereignty and cultural knowledge.
- **Committee on World Food Security Guidelines:** Provides policy tools for

integrating indigenous foods into food systems, gender, nutrition and agroecology policies.

- **African Model Legislation on the Protection of Rights of Local Communities (2000):** Recognises communities’ rights to seeds, traditional knowledge and benefit-sharing.
- **Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme 2026–2035:** Promotes climate-resilient crops, agroecology and smallholder farmer participation.
- **Pan-African Parliament Model Law on Food and Nutrition Security (2022):** Supports indigenous foods in school feeding, local procurement and nutrition plans.
- **Southern African Development Community Food and Nutrition Security Strategy (2015–2025)** calls for diversifying food production with indigenous crops and **Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (2015)** recognises the role of indigenous crops in adaptation, biodiversity and health.

Strategically used, these frameworks and others should be used to channel funding, legal protection, climate adaptation finance and public procurement policies towards indigenous food systems.

Restrictive frameworks undermining indigenous food systems

- **International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV 1991) and World Trade Organization’s Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (1994):** These intellectual property regimes prioritise commercial breeders over smallholder farmers, criminalising seed saving and weakening informal seed systems (AFSA, 2024). UPOV 1991 curtails Farmers’ Rights granting breeders 20+ years of exclusive control, imposing high costs and strict uniformity rules, and ignoring genetic origin disclosure—eroding agrobiodiversity, risking biopiracy and promoting monocultures that threaten seed sovereignty, climate resilience and cultural values (AFSA, 2024).
- **Regional harmonisation policies** under the Southern African Development Community,

the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the African Regional Intellectual Property Organization align seed laws with corporate-friendly models, eroding seed sovereignty and agroecological diversity (Mkindi et al. 2020).

These frameworks have presented significant challenges for small-scale farmers in Africa, including mounting debt, soil degradation and loss of biodiversity. They risk locking Africa into monoculture, high-input farming systems that deepen dependency on external, often expensive hybrid seeds and chemical markets, marginalising the very crops and associated knowledge that sustain climate resilience and local nutrition.



Farmer Royd explains how to apply home-produced liquid manure to the crop.

Recommendations: from local fields to regional platforms

Recommendations for policymakers

- **Evidence, data and policy integration:** Collect data on biodiversity, nutrition and economic benefits of indigenous food systems and integrate them into climate, food security and biodiversity strategies.
- **Legal and institutional reforms:** Reform seed laws to protect farmer-saved seeds and uphold Farmers' Rights, prevent UPOV 1991 adoption, secure community control over genetic resources and ensure gender equity and farmer participation in policy processes.
- **Funding, infrastructure and incentives:** Allocate funding for agroecology training, research, storage, processing and transport, with subsidies and procurement policies favouring smallholder agroecological farmers. Develop training programmes on indigenous crop cultivation and establish demonstration farms to showcase successful indigenous farming systems.
- **Education, awareness and market development:** Run public campaigns, develop school and higher education curricula on indigenous crops and agroecology, and improve labelling to highlight nutritional and sustainability benefits. Strengthen local markets and links to institutional buyers.
- **Conservation and climate resilience:** Strengthen seed banks and promote agroecological practices to conserve indigenous crop diversity and support climate adaptation.
- **Encourage regional collaboration:** Support regional seed exchange networks, farmer training programmes and indigenous food festivals. Align trade policies for free movement of seeds and foods, create regional market linkages prioritising smallholders and women, and share best practices on seed banks, demonstration farms and agroecology schools across borders.

Recommendations for faith leaders and eco-communities

- **Awareness, teaching and advocacy:** Integrate indigenous foods, food sovereignty, climate justice and agroecology into sermons and faith dialogues. Link extreme weather events to the need for climate-resilient crops and advocate for land reform, seed sovereignty and sustainable food systems in policy forums.
- **Practical actions:** Create seed- and knowledge-sharing networks, community seedbanks or ones hosted by faith institutions, and farmer training programmes. Promote indigenous foods at congregational events, revitalise ceremonies, use faith-owned land for agroecological farming and markets, and support smallholder procurement and informal traders.
- **Strategic alliances and policy engagement:** Collaborate with food sovereignty and climate justice movements, engage governments to regulate seed and agrochemical industries and fund adaptation strategies centred on indigenous crops with equity for women and marginalised groups.
- **Sustainable livelihoods and climate adaptation:** Secure donor funding and partnerships for green employment and initiatives linking food, land and climate justice with local economic resilience.



Sugar beans.

Reclaiming the future through indigenous food systems

Southern Africa stands at a crossroads. The path of industrial agriculture and restrictive seed regimes leads to ecological collapse, cultural erosion and nutritional insecurity. Faith traditions across Africa affirm that land, water, seeds and life itself are sacred and are uniquely placed to frame indigenous food systems as a moral and spiritual imperative for climate justice, food sovereignty and ecological balance.



Seed bank at Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre, Zambia.

References

- Akinola, R., Pereira, L., Mabhaudhi, T., de Bruin, F. & Rusch, L. 2020. *A review of indigenous food crops in Africa and the implications for more sustainable and healthy food systems*. Sustainability 12(8):3493. doi.org/10.3390/su12083493
- Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa [AFSA]. 2024. *Pulling back the veil: AGRA's influence on Africa's agricultural policies*. [Online] afsafrica.org/pulling-back-the-veil-agras-influence-on-africas-agricultural-policies/.
- Mgwanya, L.I., Agholor, I.A., Ludidi, N., Morepje, M.T., Sithole, M.Z., Msweli, N.S. & Thabane, V.N. 2025. *Unpacking the Multifaceted Benefits of Indigenous Crops for Food Security: A Review of Nutritional, Economic and Environmental Impacts in Southern Africa*. World 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/world6010016>
- Mkindi, A., Maina, A., Urhahn, J., Koch, J., Bassermann, L., Goïta, M., Nketani, M., Herre, R., Tanzmann, S., & Wise, T. 2020. *False Promises: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa*. Biodiversity and Biosafety Association of Kenya.
- Moyles, T. 2018. *Women who dig*. University of Regina Press.
- Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute [SAFCEI]. 2022. *Agroecology: A food and farming framework for transformative change: A synthesis report*. Cape Town: SAFCEI.
- Van Zonneveld, M., Kindt, R., McMullin, S., Achigan-Dako, E., N'Danikou, S., Hsieh, W., Lin, Y. and Dawson, I. *Forgotten food crops in sub-Saharan Africa for healthy diets in a changing climate*. PNAS (120)14.



safcei

Contact

+27 21 701 8145

info@safcei.org.za

safcei.org

