



Press Release

Rhetoric Without Roots: Steenhuisen's Commitment to Food Sovereignty at the UN Summit is Performance and Not Real

08 August 2025

In a country where over 20 million people live with the reality of hunger, climate crisis and food inequality and where corporate monopolies dominate every stage of the food system, from seeds to the supermarket, food sovereignty is a serious systemic alternative that has been championed for over a decade by small scale farmers, fishers, informal traders and climate justice activists in South Africa. Such campaigning has matured to the point that there is a Food Sovereignty Policy and Peoples Food Sovereignty Act for South Africa, 2024, developed bottom up by the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (SAFSC) and its allies which the Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen has ignored. On October 16th 2024, on World Food Day, the very same Minister was asked to meet the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign outside parliament to receive these documents. Instead, he ignored us. His deputy Minister also suggested we should find a party in parliament to champion our cause. Simply put, these are not political leaders serious about listening to and embracing ideas from workers and the poor in the country.

Hence it comes as a surprise that at the recent UN Food Systems Summit, South Africa's government represented by Minister John Steenhuisen, declared its commitment to food sovereignty as part of a just food systems transition. This declaration, alongside references to government programmes such as the Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme and Ilima/Letsema, appears promising at first glance. However, on closer inspection, what the state refers to as food sovereignty remains confined to narrow technical interventions and market-oriented frameworks that do not challenge corporate power, acknowledge the importance of land justice, or centre the leadership of small-scale food producers and their communities. As SAFSC, we reject this appropriation without any reference to the peopleled alternatives already being developed from below all over the country. The People's Food Sovereignty Act and our Food Sovereignty Policy provide clear frameworks for a just transition rooted in agroecology, land justice, and the natural commons.

The South African government's 'reaffirmation' of its commitment to food sovereignty at the UN Summit appears more symbolic and performative. In Minister Steenhuisen's address and related government materials, food sovereignty is conflated with food systems transition programmes like CASP and Ilima/Letsema and while these initiatives claim to support smallholder farmers, they remain embedded in a top-down and globalised production-focused approach. The eligibility needs of these programmes rely on access to water rights, land tenure, and institutional muscle which will inevitably exclude many informal, landless, or communal producers. The state's use of food sovereignty here reflects a developmentalist framework that prioritises agricultural modernisation and not grassroots governance. Food Sovereignty is a mere sideshow, tagged on to an agenda that, in the main, supports the interests of big commercial agriculture.

In contrast, the [People's Food Sovereignty Act No.1 of 2024](#) and the [SAFSC Food Sovereignty Policy](#) offer a genuine transformative and community-rooted alternative. We recognise the immanent risk of climate famine and failing globalised food systems. We have learned lessons from the drought (2014-2021) and Covid 19. Our Act and Policy envisage a triple transition of the food system: (1) a democratically planned transition of commercial,

large scale agriculture into the food sovereignty commons in a manner that addresses historical injustices and ensures the country is not dependent on a few big farmers; (2) bottom up support for transitions in households, communities, villages, towns and cities to food sovereignty commons systems (3) a democratically planned transition to ocean commons led by small scale fishers and coastal communities. This framework is a direct challenge to Steenhuisen's shallow approach to food sovereignty. We invite the Minister to engage and debate with us. Moreover, we demand that the cabinet of the GNU place the issue of food sovereignty and our policy on the agenda of the national dialogue process. Hunger is central to the South African crisis and the people have answers.

The Peoples Food Sovereignty Act and Policy were developed from below with the intention of asserting the right to food, commons-based solutions, and climate justice. They call for reclaiming seed, land, water, and soil through collective structures. They position food sovereignty as a deep democratic systemic reform which shifts the conversation away from corporate control over food and toward people's power. The state's UN declaration and the CASP framework ignore this grounded vision. There is no engagement with existing peopleled democratic systemic reforms, no acknowledgement on land redistribution and no serious transition to agroecology in the agricultural sector. If the government is sincere about food sovereignty, it must move beyond developmentalist approaches and adopt frameworks already crafted by our communities. It must dismantle corporate control over the food system, recentre the commons, and respect democratic food systems as envisioned by our communities. Until then, these state declarations remain performative and disconnected from the radical transformation that true food sovereignty demands.

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