Who is making food policy in South Africa

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National government responsibilities for food policy-making in South Africa
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Food policy in South Africa is made by 15 departments across government. The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development emerges as the most important for food policy. Together with the Department of Social Development, their mandate includes the National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security, the most significant single piece of food policy in the country. The National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security provides a broad framework for the fulfilment of the “right to food” which was embedded into the national constitution in 1993. It serves as a guide to national, provincial and local government in pursuing food security at every level. However, it is the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation that has an overarching coordination function connecting food policy to the other national strategies like the National Development Plan. This assumption of responsibility for food and nutrition improvement at the highest levels of government is unique in that this overarching department plays the role of coordinating between different levels of government to ensure policies are implemented coherently across jurisdictions.

The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development is also responsible for supporting agricultural development through promoting the production of field crops and livestock and implementing land reform. Programmes include financial assistance through the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Framework for Agriculture (AgriBEE), and the Micro Agricultural Financial Institutions of South Africa (MAFISA) and the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) to promote economic development in rural areas and address the legacy of Apartheid through land reform. Stimulating innovation and training in improved agricultural and food systems, and ensuring intellectual property rights is the mandate of the Department of Science and Innovation.

The Department of Health has a mandate to address undernutrition, obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). They deal with Regulations Relating to the Fortification of Certain Foodstuffs that makes it compulsory for dry and uncooked wheat flour, uncooked maize meal, and bread to be fortified with micronutrients, alongside iodine in salt; micronutrient supplementation programmes, and dietary guidelines, food labelling regulations, salt reduction, and a tax on sugar sweetened beverages.

The Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries also cover major policy mandates, including the Small-Scale Fisheries Policy (2012), sustainable use of biodiversity, including marine resources, many of which are harvested for consumption as food and the Climate Change Response, which outlines how government is working to mitigate and adapt to climate change, especially relevant for agriculture in a drought-prone country. The Department of Water and Sanitation covers the National Water Act (1998) and water regulation.

The Department of Basic Education took over the National School Nutrition Programme from the Department of Health in 2004, and extended it to secondary schools in 2009. Its purpose is to address hunger, and improve school attendance, performance and attentiveness in poorer schools. The Department of Social Development is also involved in nutrition since they manage Early Childhood Development centres which are critical spaces for young children to access healthy food.

The National Treasury and Department of Social Development are critical for the economic aspects of food policy. The latter provides unconditional cash transfers to help support qualifying households through the Social Assistance Act (2004) that includes grants for pensioners, people with disabilities, and a child support grant. In 1991, the National Treasury introduced a zero-rating Value Added Tax (VAT) policy that removed the 15% VAT levy (originally 14%) on nineteen staple foods to make them more affordable for poor households. The Department of Small Business Development is responsible for supporting entrepreneurs, and in the context of the food system has a particularly important role in supporting informal businesses, of which many are food traders. The Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities holds the mandate to ensure no discrimination in the workplace and the National Youth Development Agency mainstreams youth issues, including in the food sector. The Department of Employment and Labour protects workers’ rights, including the right to a fair wage and focuses on job creation to alleviate poverty and thereby ensure economic access to food.

The Department of Trade, Industry and Competition plays a critical role in food policy in that it regulates the trade of food within the country, and ensures fairness in business practice, but is also responsible for regulating food imports and exports. All food trade is dependent on well-functioning transport systems, which is the mandate of the Department of Transport.
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