



RURAL WOMEN'S ASSEMBLY

Declaration of the Rural Women's Assembly Consultative Policy Dialogue

University of Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa

9 June 2026

We, the rural women, small-scale farmers, peasant producers, agroecology practitioners, seed custodians, farm workers, fishers, and leaders of the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA) representing eleven countries of Southern Africa: Lesotho, Malawi, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Eswatini, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe gathered with policymakers, researchers, academics, human rights and gender commissioners, partners, and regional and global experts in land and food systems from 7 to 9 June 2026, under the theme **"We Have Answers: Building Resilient Food Systems."**

We meet at a moment of profound urgency: climate breakdown, uncertainty, deepening food insecurity, escalating agrarian inequality, and biodiversity loss, as global tensions reshape livelihoods across our region. Yet dominant policy responses continue to offer the same prescriptions that produced the very crises we now face.

We convene within the **UN International Year of the Woman Farmer**, a recognition that must translate into structural transformation, not ceremonial acknowledgement. Rural women are not a "target group." We are knowledge holders, innovators, producers, seed custodians, and leaders. We have answers.

We Affirm the Power, Knowledge and Rights of Rural Women

We open with the collective voice of our members, who have spoken with clarity, dignity, and power:

"Seed is life. Our seeds must be cared for and protected. They are the seeds of our mothers and grandmothers, passed from one generation to the next, adapted to our soils, our climates, and our communities."

In this era of climate crisis, it is traditional seeds that resist and endure. They are not relics; they are our most powerful tool for climate resilience and food sovereignty. We preserve, multiply, and share them, and build seed banks to hold this living treasure. We promote seed sovereignty.

We do not wait to be given seeds from companies or from governments that do not know our land. Seeds are our heritage, and they belong to us.

Farmer-managed seed systems, developed and adapted across generations, are among humanity's most important living commons, the result of millennia of women's science, labour, and custodianship. We affirm unequivocally: seed saving and seed sharing are acts of resistance, sovereignty, and ecological intelligence, indispensable to food security, climate adaptation, and the realisation of the right to food.

We Declare: Feminist Agroecology Is the Alternative

Feminist Agroecology Feeds the World

Small-scale women and peasant farmers produce the majority of food consumed across the Global South on a fraction of the land controlled by agribusiness, with constrained access to land, water, seeds, markets, and credit. This is not simply an agricultural fact. It is a political scandal and an economic injustice.

We reject the framing that positions small-scale/peasant agriculture as backward and agribusiness as development. Rural women small scale farmers are not a problem to be solved or a sector to be modernised. We are the backbone of food systems across Southern Africa, and the agents of a future that agribusiness cannot deliver.

Feminist Agroecology Is a Climate Intervention

Industrial agriculture with its chemical inputs, fossil-fuel dependency, and monocultures is a leading driver of greenhouse gas emissions, soil degradation, and ecological destruction. Feminist agroecology does the opposite. It works with ecological processes rather than against them: restoring soil health, retaining water, sequestering carbon, and maintaining biodiversity. Intercropping, composting, agroforestry, and farmer-managed seed systems are climate adaptation interventions already happening, at scale, across our eleven countries.

Climate scientists and the IPCC increasingly confirm what rural women have always known through practice: agroecology is essential to climate resilience. The question is whether policymakers will align resources and frameworks with this reality.

Agroecology Is Decolonising Agriculture

The agrarian systems of Southern Africa remain shaped by colonial dispossession: well-resourced, legally protected agribusiness on one side, and dispossessed, deliberately disempowered peasant agriculture on the other. This extractive logic did not end at independence. It was restructured and reproduced through structural adjustment, seed legislation, land markets, and development finance.

Agroecology and farmer-managed seed systems are therefore a decolonial initiative. They restore our sovereignty: the right to know, to name, and to practise material sovereignty over seeds, land, and food. When the RWA builds collective power through feminist agroecology, it is dismantling a colonial legacy and patriarchy.

We Challenge the Political Economy of Agrarian Capital

The current food system prioritises profit over people. Seed companies, agri-input multinationals, corporate retailers, and their financiers have a direct interest in incorporating peasant farmers as customers dependent on their seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, supermarket shelves and loans. This is not a conspiracy; it is market logic.

A rural woman who saves her own seeds, builds her own compost, and sells through local markets is self-reliant and cannot be captured by corporations and agrarian capital. When the woman farmer controls more of her production she controls the value of what she produces. That means less profits for corporate capital, which explains the relentless pressure on governments to impose corporate intellectual property regimes. Defending small-scale farmer/peasant seeds is therefore not only a cultural or agronomic concern. It is resistance to the commodification of life itself.

We Critique CAADP and Corporate-Led Agricultural Development

We register our strong critique of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) as currently structured and implemented. Despite its language of food security and transformation, CAADP in practice functions as a neoliberal, pro-agribusiness programme that systematically marginalises rural women and peasant farmers. Under the guise of “climate-smart agriculture,” it advances private investment, the commercialisation of seeds and inputs, and the adverse incorporation of peasant farmers into circuits of capital for corporate accumulation. It is an elite-driven programme designed around the priorities of agribusiness, development finance institutions, and donor governments.

We challenge:

- The promotion of private investment as the primary development pathway, which dispossesses small-scale/peasant farmers rather than strengthening their autonomy;
- Corporate seed systems and intellectual property frameworks including UPOV-compliant seed legislation that criminalise seed saving and sharing;
- The framing of rural women as “beneficiaries” rather than rights-holders and decision-makers;

- Chronic under-investment or non-investment in agroecology while public resources subsidise agribusiness inputs and commercial seed supply chains;
- The tokenism and exclusion of rural women's movements from meaningful participation in continental frameworks.

We further challenge **Farmer Input Subsidy Programmes (FISPs)** across Southern Africa as an expression of this model. Rather than supporting rural women's autonomy, FISPs have functioned primarily to channel public resources into commercial seed and fertiliser markets, deepening dependence on corporate inputs. Evidence across Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique shows FISP expenditure flowing predominantly to commercial companies, while diverting budgets away from agroecological transition, community seed banks, and farmer-centred support. Public investment should strengthen rural women's productive autonomy, not deepen corporate dependency.

Reaffirming Food Sovereignty

We reaffirm and align ourselves fully with the **Dakar Declaration on Food Sovereignty**, adopted by allied peasant and farmer movements, which establishes food sovereignty and the right of peoples to define their own food systems and agricultural policies as the foundational framework for genuine transformation.

We call on the African Union, SADC, and member states to fundamentally restructure CAADP in alignment with the Dakar Declaration and the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP)**. This requires no structural reorientation: redirecting public investment, reforming seed legislation, and placing the knowledge, labour, and leadership of rural women at the heart of continental agricultural governance.

We Demand: From Policymakers and Institutions

On Seeds and Seed Sovereignty

- Protect, recognise, promote, and legally affirm the right of rural women and peasant farmers to save, use, exchange, and sell farm-saved seeds, free from criminalisation and intellectual property restrictions;
- Reject legislative frameworks, including UPOV 1991-compliant seed laws, that subordinate farmer-managed seed systems to corporate intellectual property regimes;
- Invest public resources in community seed banks and small-scale farmer-managed seed systems as a primary strategy for climate adaptation and biodiversity conservation;

- Recognise indigenous and traditional seed knowledge as intellectual heritage belonging to farming communities, not to corporations.

On Agroecology, Food Sovereignty, and the Right to Food

- **Mainstream and resource agroecology** across national and regional agricultural policy frameworks as the primary pathway to climate resilience, food sovereignty, and sustainable land management;
- **Redirect agricultural public investment** including research, extension, and infrastructure from chemical input subsidies and commercial seed support toward agroecological transition;
- **Recognise food sovereignty** the right of peoples to define their own food systems and agricultural policies as a foundational principle of regional agricultural governance;
- **Affirm and implement the right to food as a justiciable human right**, enshrining it in national legislation and agricultural policy across the region, including through community-based monitoring mechanisms that centre rural women's experiences;

On Land and Agrarian Justice

- Implement genuine, redistributive land reform that provides rural women with secure, collective, and individually held land rights not titling schemes or market-led mechanisms that accelerate land concentration;
- End land grabbing in all its forms, including for agribusiness, conservation, and carbon market projects, which dispossess rural communities and undermine food sovereignty;
- Recognise and protect community land rights over customary territories, forests, and water sources.

On Recognition and Political Inclusion

- Recognise that rural women have agency, leadership, and solutions and support their organisations and movements accordingly;
- Guarantee the meaningful, decision-making participation of rural women's movements and peasant organisations in the design, implementation, and evaluation of all agricultural and food system policies at local, national, regional, and continental levels;
- Implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) in full, including its provisions on seeds, land, food sovereignty, and political participation;
- Use the International Year of the Woman Farmer to commit to structural and budgetary transformation not symbolic declarations.

The Rural Women's Assembly Commits

The Rural Women's Assembly is a living, growing movement of counter-power, a concrete alternative to an agricultural system designed to dispossess. We commit to:

1. **Building and strengthening the movement** deepened our roots in villages, farms, and rural towns, prioritising the poorest and most marginalised rural women, and organising from local to regional level.
2. **Advancing feminist agroecology** as both practice and politics, combining agroecological techniques with political education, collective organisation, and knowledge exchange, and amplifying women-led innovations across Southern Africa.
3. **Protecting farmer-managed seed systems** through expanding community seed banks, supporting seed multiplication and exchange across communities and borders, training seed custodians, and resisting any measure that criminalises seed saving.
4. **Advocating for climate justice** rooted in feminist agroecology, challenging “climate-smart agriculture,” demanding the redirection of climate finance and agricultural budgets toward farmer-managed systems, and monitoring CAADP, SADC frameworks, and national budgets.
5. **Championing appropriate technology on our own terms** — supporting technologies that reduce labour burdens on women and strengthen agroecological production, while resisting corporate-controlled digital platforms, proprietary biotechnologies, and data-extractive systems.
6. **Building solidarity economies and collective power** strengthening local food networks, community markets, mutual aid, and collective savings that give rural women economic agency outside debt-driven corporate systems.
7. **Defending rights and pursuing accountability** — documenting violations of rights to land, seeds, food, water, and participation, using UNDROP and other frameworks at national, regional, and international levels.
8. **Building alliances** — deepening collaboration with feminist, labour, environmental justice, faith-based movements, and allied civil society organisations.
9. **Amplifying rural women's voices** — strengthening our presence from local to global spaces, including the African Union, SADC, and UN processes, and telling our own stories, refusing to let others define who we are and what we are capable of.

Finally we reject policies that deepen dependency, dispossession, and corporate control. We affirm food sovereignty, feminist agroecology, agrarian justice, and the rights of peasants and rural communities.

We are not waiting for solutions. We have the answers and are already creating the solutions.

Adopted by the Rural Women's Assembly Consultative Policy Dialogue

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