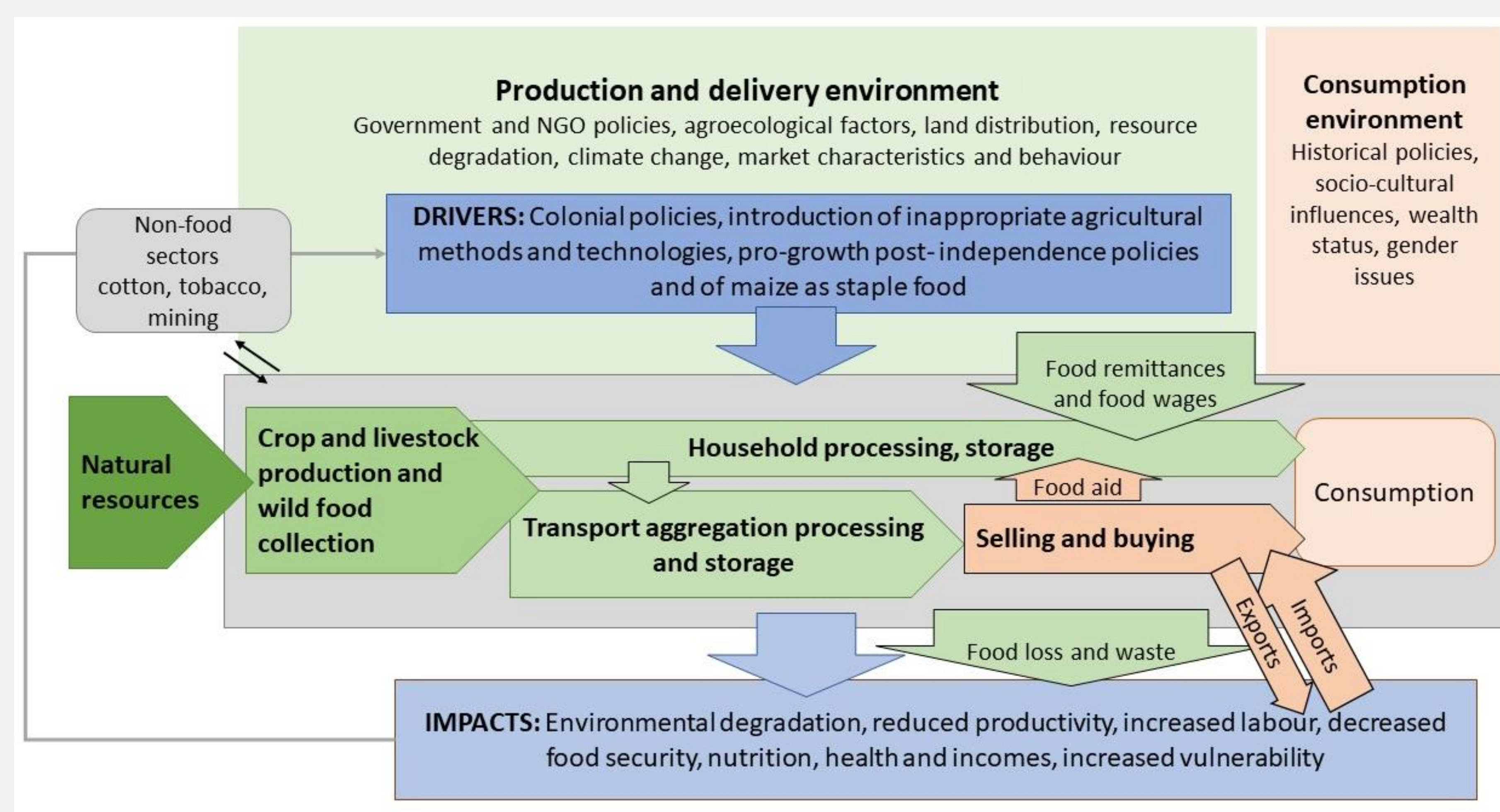


Zimbabwe's rural food systems in jeopardy

Sacrificing the local for the national

Introduction

Zimbabwe's food systems are contributing to malnutrition, environmental degradation, and vulnerability. Well-intended government policies and NGO projects often undermine the sustainability of rural food systems. Drawing on research in the marginal Gokwe region, contextualised with an analysis of Zimbabwe's national food system, we look at more holistic ways to transform the food system.



Gokwe food system analysis showing drivers and impacts

Findings

While Gokwe is a hub of diverse food production, the most nutritious, cultivated food is exported to national markets, leaving most rural residents with a monotonous, impoverished diet.

Key food system drivers: colonial land appropriation, introduction of inappropriate agricultural methods and technologies, pro-growth post-independence policies and promotion of maize as the staple.

Impacts on the food system:

- marginalisation of resilient, indigenous agriculture systems, crops, diets and knowledge leading to environmental degradation, malnutrition and vulnerability.
- Inappropriate agricultural systems are causing wide-scale environmental degradation and declining yields.
- Rural food systems contribute little to nutritious diets or incomes for most farmers.
- Women are the main food system actors but suffer an unfair labour burden, lower incomes, and poor nutrition.
- In Gokwe the poor have a more nutritionally diverse diet than the better-off, but eat less. The wealthy eat more imported, highly-refined, less-nutritious food.
- Food has become a commodity, a status symbol and a political tool.

Government and NGO development projects have focused on agricultural production linked to national markets, paying less attention to nutrition behaviour change or environmental protection.

Conclusion

Government policies focused on agricultural growth and NGO policies that focus on raising incomes are likely to exacerbate nutrition problems and food insecurity unless they take a more holistic approach. To transform the food system development projects must:

- reduce the focus on markets and raising incomes,
- build on local knowledge and the lived experience of women in particular.
- Have a stronger focus on nutrition behaviour change and environmental protection.



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Methods

The paper is based on two 2021 studies using the FAO food systems analysis framework:

- An analysis of Zimbabwe's National Food system conducted for the UN Food Systems Summit
- An analysis of the rural and urban food systems in Gokwe North and Gokwe South districts
- **Data collection:** literature reviews, stakeholder dialogues, key informant interviews with national and local government representatives and extension workers, focus group discussions with smallholder farmers.
- Government and donor development policies and projects were analysed.