An Assessment of the Usefulness of the Concept of Food Sovereignty in Achieving Food Security in Lesotho: The Case of SADP Farmers

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DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Declaration of Originality

I, Thuso Hendrick Mohololoholo, declare that this dissertation titled "An Assessment of the Usefulness of the Concept of Food Sovereignty in Achieving Food Security in Lesotho: The Case of SADP Farmers" is my own original work and has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other degree or qualification at this or any other university.

All sources used in this dissertation have been properly acknowledged and cited in accordance with academic conventions. Where I have drawn upon the work of others, their contributions have been clearly indicated and referenced.

I further declare that ethical considerations relevant to this research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and data anonymisation, have been duly addressed as outlined in the methodology and appendices.

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List of Abbreviations

CNAP: Comprehensive National Agriculture Policy

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations

FEWS NET: Famine Early Warning Systems Network

GMOs: Genetically Modified Organisms

IFAD: International Fund for Agricultural Development

IPC: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification

LVC: La Via Campesina

MNN: MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism

NSDP: National Strategic Development Plan

SADC: Southern African Development Community

SADP: Smallholder Agriculture Development Project

SLF: Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

TA: Thematic Analysis

WFP: World Food Programme

Abstract

Lesotho is confronted with ongoing challenges pertaining to food insecurity (FAO, 2023), which are frequently addressed through market-centric strategies such as the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP). This initiative aims to foster the commercialisation of smallholder agriculture within designated value chains to bolster traditional metrics of food security (World Bank, 2016). Nonetheless, the prevailing food security framework usually neglects more profound issues connected to power dynamics, sustainability, and local governance (Clapp, 2021), which are pivotal to the alternative framework of food sovereignty (the inherent right of communities to determine their own food systems) (Patel, 2009; Wittman et al., 2017). This investigation seeks to fill the significant void in comprehending the potential conflicts and synergies between the market-oriented approach of SADP and the principles of food sovereignty within the context of Lesotho, particularly considering the conspicuous absence of explicit food sovereignty considerations in national policy.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the analytical relevance of the food sovereignty framework in elucidating the lived realities, perceived opportunities, and challenges encountered by farmers participating in the SADP as they navigate pathways toward sustainable food security. Utilising an interpretivist paradigm alongside a qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2018), the study focuses on farmers affiliated with SADP farmers operating within selected agricultural value chains in the Maseru district of Lesotho. The collection of data primarily hinges on comprehensive, semi-structured interviews, augmented by pertinent document analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) serves to interpret the perspectives of farmers on essential dimensions of food sovereignty, encompassing autonomy, control over resources (including land, seeds, and knowledge), ecological sustainability, market dependencies, and overall empowerment within the SADP framework.

The investigation of these experiences through the perspective of food sovereignty, the study explores the intricate ways in which market integration influences farmer agency and the potential common and uncommon grounds between SADP interventions and the transformative aspirations of food sovereignty. The anticipated results are expected to yield important empirical insights into the discourse related to food security and food sovereignty (e.g., Hospes & Brons, 2016; Patel, 2009), provide policy-relevant considerations for Lesotho in relation to sustainable and stable agricultural development, and inform development practitioners who seek interventions that genuinely empowers smallholder farmers.

Definition of Terms

Agro-ecology

Refers to a sustainable farming approach that integrates local ecological knowledge and minimises reliance on external chemical inputs. In this study, it represents the alternative agricultural paradigm that is often contrasted with SADP's modernisation model.

Food Security

This is a framework describing the condition in which all people have consistent physical and economic access to sufficient and safe food. This study utilised the term to refer to the conventional, market-oriented framework that guides interventions such as SADP, focusing on income and food availability.

Food Sovereignty

It is defined as the right of peoples to control their own food and agricultural systems (how they grow, manage, sell, etc.). It is used as the main analytical framework in this study to assess farmer autonomy, local control, and ecological sustainability.

Hybrid Seeds

Conventional produced seeds from cross-pollinated plants. This type of seeds requires farmers to purchase them annually. In this paper, they represent a key source of dependency and a challenge to farmers' seed autonomy.

Interpretivist Paradigm

The research philosophy that guides this research. It posits that reality is socially constructed and directs the research to focus on understanding the subjective meanings and lived experiences of the SADP farmers.

Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP)

This is a certain marked-driven development program operating in Lesotho that is the subject of this case study. Its objective to enhance smallholder incomes by integrating farmers into formal commercial value chains.

Thematic Analysis

The method of qualitative data analysis used in this research to systematically identify, organise, and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) from the farmer interviews.

Seed Sovereignty

Refers to the right of farmers to save, use, exchange, and sell their own farm-saved seeds. It is a core principle of food sovereignty used to analyse the degree of farmer independence from commercial seed markets

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

Ensuring a sustainable and adequate access to food remains an important issue to be solved. This is particularly true for developing nations such as Lesotho, officially battling with intersecting environmental, political, economic and social challenges. When it comes to solving this problem, for a long time, the dominant perspective has been around the concept of food security, which focuses on emphasising food availability, access, utilisation, and stability has guided policy for decades. However, its limitations in addressing the root cause of hunger and malnutrition, often fixed inequalities of power and unsustainable practices, are increasingly recognised (Clapp, 2020). As a response, the concept of food sovereignty was promoted by social movements, advocating for the rights of peoples to define their own food systems, control resources, promote agro-ecological production, and prioritise local needs (Patel, 2009; Wittman et al.,2017).

Lesotho faces a challenge of persistent food insecurity, caused by multiple factors including unfavourable climate conditions, land degradation, dependence on imports and poverty, which provides a critical context for examining these contrasting paradigms (FAO, 2023). Significant interventions, such as the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP), aim to improve food security by mainly fostering the commercialisation of smallholder agriculture and integrating farmers into formal value chains (World Bank, 2016). However, this approach raises important questions when viewed through the perspective of food sovereignty.

1.2 Background

A key problem that SADP does not adequately solve is Lesotho's heavy reliance on imported food and farming inputs. The country imports a significant amount of its food, particularly from South Africa (Famine Early Warning Systems Network [FEWS NET], 2024). This reliance extends to agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilisers, making the farmers in Lesotho susceptible to supply chain disruptions and price volatility in neighbouring countries. While the focus of SADP on commercialisation and integration into larger market systems is beneficial for some people, it can inadvertently reinforce this dependency. The food

sovereignty framework is inherently critical of import and technological dependency, arguing that such systems can undermine peasant agriculture (McMichael, 2014).

Conversely, food sovereignty promotes the use of locally adapted seeds and agro ecological practices. Although Lesotho has a rich heritage of indigenous farming knowledge and locally resilient seed varieties, there is a growing concern that this traditional knowledge is being marginalised as industrial agriculture expands (Kloppenburg, 2010). Projects endorse the use of "improved" or hybrid seeds, often a feature of development programs focused on productivity, can lead to a decline in agricultural biodiversity and erode the autonomy of farmers who traditionally save, exchange, and breed their own seeds. Although SADP II aims to promote the adoption of climate-smart agricultural technologies, a food sovereignty approach would mostly support farmer-led seed systems and agro ecological methods that improve local resilience without relying on external inputs (Altieri & Nicholls, 2012).

Furthermore, the principle of localising food systems (a cornerstone of food sovereignty) appears to be a gap in SADP's approach. The project's emphasis on value chains and market access, while intending to increase incomes, has not always translated into stronger local food economies. Food sovereignty promotes reducing the distance between producers and consumers thereby empowering local communities to control their own food distribution systems (World Trade Organization [WTO], 2015). This ensures that food is first and foremost for the people within a territory (Wittman, 2011).

Another critical aspect of food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture policies. Although SADP works hand in hand with the Government of Lesotho, the project's framework and funding from international bodies such as the World Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) can influence national agricultural priorities. On the other hand, the food sovereignty approach would emphasise a more bottom-up process, where the needs and knowledge of smallholder farmers are central to shaping agricultural policies and research agendas, instead of relying on external ideologies (Beuchelt & Virchow, 2012).

This study addresses the possible disconnections between SADP's market-driven development strategies and the food sovereignty principles. Particularly, it examines the issue that SADP's emphasis on commercialisation, while aiming for food security gains, may be insufficient for attaining the broader goals of food sovereignty (such as farmer autonomy, ecological sustainability, and local control) and therefore may not lead to a legitimately sustainable

national food security. This concern is fuelled by the supposed lack of strong food sovereignty framework within Lesotho's national policy landscape. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to assess the usefulness of the food sovereignty concept as an analytical framework for understanding the experiences, opportunities and challenges faced by SADP-sponsored farmers (participating farmers in Lesotho). This study will use food sovereignty as a critical perspective to explore the farmers' perspectives on control, sustainability, and empowerment within the context of SADP's value chain interventions.

This introductory chapter sets the stage for the research. Section 1.3 presents the statement of the problem, followed by the research questions (1.4), objectives (1.5), the significance of the study (1.6), scope of the study (1.7) and the limitations of the study (1.8).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Agricultural development for the achievement of food security is one of the key development priority areas in Lesotho as articulated in the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP-2). Within this priority area Lesotho implemented the Smallholder Agricultural Development Project (SADP) which was initiated with assistance of international donors that included the World Bank and IFAD (IFAD, 2020). This project is currently in the second phase. In the first phase of the project, it covered four of Lesotho's administrative districts, namely Butha-Bothe, Berea, Leribe and Mafeteng. It aims to strengthen Lesotho's national food security by promoting small-scale farming commercialisation through integration into selected value chains. Nonetheless, although this market-led approach has the potential to create income-increase for some participants, it appears to be insufficient in meeting the essential criteria for food sovereignty and, consequently, may lack the necessary principles needed in achieving sustainable national food security (IFAD, 2020). Food sovereignty emphasises democratic control over food systems, ecological sustainability, farmer autonomy, and the periodization of local needs- principles that may be overlooked by commercialisation strategies that are focused on external markets, standardised production, and reliance on external inputs.

Furthermore, although Lesotho has strategies aimed at weakening food insecurity and increasing agricultural productivity, there seems to be a significant gap regarding the formal recognition and integration of food sovereignty principles into national policy (Government of Lesotho, 2018; World Bank, 2021). This is because there is lack of specific frameworks guiding agricultural development or food sovereignty legislation. Consequently, interventions such as SADP operate within a policy environment which is primarily aligned with conventional food

security metrics, potentially overlooking or even contradicting the deeper systemic changes advocated by the food sovereignty paradigm (Patel, 2013; Nyéléni, 2015). This disconnection creates a critical problem; without intention, the development efforts might create new dependencies or ecological vulnerabilities while failing to build the resilient, equitable, and locally controlled food systems envisioned by food security (Claeys, 2021). This research addresses the need to empirically investigate this tension by assessing the usefulness of the food sovereignty concept for understanding the experiences of farmers engaged in SADP II.

1.4 Research Questions (RQ)

This study is guided by the following primary research questions. They are designed to systematically explore the multifaceted relationship between food security and food sovereignty within Lesotho's agricultural context:

- What are the conceptual linkages between food security and food sovereignty? (A theoretical assessment)
- To what extent can the food security strategy adopted by SADP, cantered on commercialisation within selected value chains, potentially put Lesotho on a path towards achieving food sovereignty principles?
- What are the key opportunities perceived by SADP farmers within the project's selected agricultural value chains that could align with or advance aspects of food sovereignty?
- What are the key challenges perceived by SADP farmers within the project's selected agricultural value chains that hinder the realisation of food sovereignty principles?

1.5 Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to investigate the usefulness of the concept of food sovereignty in understanding pathways towards sustainable food security for SADP farmers in Lesotho. To achieve this overarching goal, the following specific objectives are precisely designed to align with and directly address each of the research questions (RQ):

1.5.1 Objectives of the Study

- **Objective 1 (aligned with (RQ1):** To establish how a food sovereignty strategy can be adapted to achieve food security in Lesotho.
- **Objective 2 (aligned with RQ2):** To assess the extent to which the food security strategy that has been adopted by SADP can put Lesotho on a path of food sovereignty.

- **Objective 3 (aligned with RQ3):** To assess the key opportunities in the agricultural value chains selected by SADP to achieving food sovereignty.
- **Objective 4 (aligned with RQ4):** To identify and assess the key challenges perceived by SADP farmers within the project's selected agricultural value chains that significantly hinder the realisation of food sovereignty principles.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research holds significance on several levels:

Academic Contribution

It contributes empirical evidence to the ongoing theoretical debates between food security and food sovereignty by applying the food sovereignty framework as an analytical tool in a specific development project context. It addresses a gap in qualitative research investigating perspectives of farmers on market integration projects through this critical perspective, specifically within the region of Southern Africa and specifically Lesotho.

Policy Relevance

The findings can inform policy makers in Lesotho and the fellow developing countries about the possible limitations and trade-offs linked with commercialisation-focused farming strategies when viewed from sustainability and equity perspective. It may highlight the need to include food sovereignty principles into national agricultural and food security policies.

Practical Implications

The study provides insights for development practitioners, NGOs and farmer organisations working with Lesotho's smallholder farmers and similar contexts. Understanding the challenges and opportunities related to farmer autonomy, ecological practices, and local control within value chain projects can help create more effective and equitable interventions that genuinely empower farmers.

Amplifying Farmers Voices

The emphasis on the perspectives and experience of SADP farmers gives voice to the people directly impacted by development intervention and thereby offering insights that may differ from official project reports or purely quantitative assessments.

1.7 Scope

This study specifically focuses on the experiences of smallholder farmers participating in the second phase of Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP II) in Lesotho, within selected agricultural value chains targeted by the project. The primary analytical perspective is the concept of food sovereignty. This research utilises a qualitative case study approach within specific geographic areas where SADP operates.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

This study, like all research, is subject to certain limitations that must be acknowledged to contextualise the findings appropriately.

Generalisability: As a qualitative case study focused on a small, purposively selected sample of farmers within the Maseru district, the findings are not statistically generalizable to all SADP participants across Lesotho or to all smallholder farmers. The experiences and views of farmers captured may be specific to this region and the value chains investigated. However, the study aimed for analytical generalisation, whereby the in-depth knowledge into the conflicts and dynamics of market integration can offer insightful, transferable lessons for understanding similar interventions in other contexts (Yin, 2018).

Subjectivity: The research is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges that findings are co-constructed through the interaction between the researcher and the participants. The analysis is the researcher's interpretation of the farmers' accounts, which are their subjective interpretations of their reality. Efforts were made to ensure trustworthiness through triangulation and reflexivity, but the inherent subjectivity of qualitative inquiry remains.

Scope and Focus: The study's focus was food sovereignty. It was not designed as a comprehensive impact assessment of SADP against its own stated objectives. A quantitative analysis might reveal, for instance, that the average income gains for participants significantly outweigh the increased input costs, leading to a different, though not necessarily contradictory, conclusion about the project's economic benefits. This study focused on the qualitative costs and trade-offs that such an evaluation might miss.

Potential for Selection Bias: While efforts were made to achieve maximum variation in the sample, the reliance on purposive and snowball sampling techniques carries a risk of selection bias. It is possible that the farmers who agreed to participate were those with stronger opinions or more pronounced experiences (either positive or negative) with the project.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Achieving sustainable food security remains a critical global issue, particularly in developing countries such as Lesotho, whose development faces the challenges of poverty, environmental vulnerability, and structural economic constraints. While the established framework of food security (which emphasises food availability, access, utilisation, and stability (FAO, 1996) continues to guide multiple policy initiatives, including the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP) in Lesotho, its efficacy and equity dimensions face increasing scrutiny (Lang & Heasman, 2015). Critiques highlight this framework's alignment with market-driven, productivism solutions that may neglect underlying power inequalities and ecological cost (McMichael, 2014). In response, the concept of food sovereignty has emerged from social movements as a counter-hegemonic discourse, demanding a fundamental reorientation of food systems around principles of democratic control, ecological integrity, cultural appropriateness, and the right of producers (Patel, 2009; Wittman et al., 2017).

This literature review explores the theoretical landscape which encompasses food security and food sovereignty. It goes beyond mere description to engage in a rigorous analysis of their conceptual intersections, inherent tensions, and the specific implications these have for agricultural development in Lesotho. The discussion is grounded on the specific socio-ecological and political-economic context of the agricultural sector and SADP intervention in Lesotho. By utilising food sovereignty as its main theoretical perspective, this chapter aims to not only clarify the conceptual debates but also to demonstrate the critical purchase of this framework in evaluating real-world interventions. This critical assessment is crucial for understanding how prevailing development models may inadvertently create dependencies or overlook local capacities, ultimately shaping the nuanced research gap addressed in this study.

This chapter critically reviews the origins, principles and debates surrounding food sovereignty and its related theoretical constructs. Section 2.2 dissects the relationship between food security and food sovereignty, section 2.3 contextualises agricultural challenges and policy environment in Lesotho, Section 2.4 outlines the SADP initiative, section 2.5 critically assesses SADP's potential alignment and misalignment with food sovereignty principles based on existing scholarship and section 2.6 focuses on opportunities and challenges within its value

chains. The overarching goal is to establish a strong theoretical and contextual foundation for the study's empirical inquiry into the utility of the food sovereignty concept for understanding the experiences of SADP farmers they identify and justifying the specific research gap this study addresses in Section 2.7.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This research adopts food sovereignty as its central analytical framework, recognising its normative commitment and political origins. This core framework is enriched and nuanced by engaging with complementary and sometimes contrasting theories, including food security, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), Political Ecology, Agro ecology, and the Right to Food. Understanding the specific contributions and limitations of each framework is important for a rigorous analysis of SADP's impacts on smallholder farmers in Lesotho.

2.2.1 The Concept of Food Sovereignty (Core Theoretical Framework)

Origins and Counter-Hegemonic Emergence

Food sovereignty originated not as an academic abstraction but as a political mobilisation tool expressed by La Via Campesina (LVC) in 1996, explicitly opposing the perceived detrimental impacts of neoliberal globalisation on livelihoods of peasants and food systems (Desmarais, 2008). It constituted a radical critique of the "Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture" and the corporate consolidation of power within the global food regime, challenging the premises upon which dominant food security narratives were built (McMichael, 2014; Patel, 2009). Its development reflects a struggle for cognitive justice, asserting the validity of peasant knowledge and work views against technocratic and mart-centric approaches (Martinez-Torres & Rosset, 2014).

Defining Food Sovereignty: Rights, Control, and System Change

The pivotal Nyeleni Declaration (LVC, 2007) defines food sovereignty as "The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture system". This definition emphasises collective rights of people, democratic control over the methods of production and distribution, ecological sustainability, and cultural relevance. Fundamentally, it poses a challenge for the commodification of food and seeks to re-embed food systems within social and ecological context, prioritising local autonomy over market dictates (Pimbert, 2018; Chiavoni, 2017; Wittman, 2011).

Pillars/Principals of Food Sovereignty: A Normative Framework

Oftentimes, the concept of food sovereignty is expressed through its interconnected pillars that expresses its perspective (Nyéléni Declaration, 2007);

1) **Focuses of Food for People,** prioritising the appropriate food and nutrition over profit-driven motives.
2) **Values Food Providers,** recognising and honouring the contribution of diverse small-scale producers, including women and marginalised groups.
3) **Localises food systems,** thus reducing the distance between producers and consumers to enhance accountability, reduce ecological footprints and build local economies.
4) **Puts control locally,** asserting community rights to land, water, seeds, biodiversity and decision-making processes against privatisation, an external control.
5) **Builds knowledge and skills promoting agro ecological innovation** through farmer-to-farmer exchange and valuing indigenous knowledge systems alongside relevant scientific contributions.
6) **Works with nature,** emphasising food production in agro ecological principles that enhance resilience, biodiversity and soil health, minimising reliance on harmful external inputs.

Collectively, these pillars articulate a vision for transformative change across social, political, economic and ecological dimensions of the food system.

Critiques, Debates, and Internal Tensions

Food sovereignty does not exist without its critics or internal complexities. Oftentimes, academic critiques emphasise its alleged conceptual vagueness, potential for parochialism or protectionism, the challenge of defining "the people" who exercise sovereignty, and practical implementation hurdles, particularly regarding scale and interaction with state power (Bernstein, 2014; Edelman, 2014; Hospes, 2014). Feminist scholars have raised important questions about ensuring gender equity within ostensibly democratic local control structures, warning against romanticising tradition (Agarwal, 2014). Furthermore, contradictions exist within the movement itself regarding strategies, the role of markets (local vs. wider), and engagement with state institutions (Edelman & Wittman, 2020; McKay et al., 2014). Recognising these critiques and internal dynamics is essential for a nuanced application of the framework, avoiding its uncritical adoption.

Food Sovereignty as a Political Project and Process

Fundamentally, food sovereignty must be understood not as merely as a fixed blueprint or achievable end-state. Rather, it should be understood as more of an ongoing political project and dynamic process of struggle (Schiavoni, 2017). It involves continuous contestation over meaning, policy advocacy (e.g., for land reform, supportive seed laws), building alternative food networks from the ground up, and challenging entrenched power structures within local, national, and global food systems (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014). The application of this concept analytically requires sensitivity to these political dimensions.

2.2.2 Related Theoretical Frameworks and Concepts

Food Security

The globally dominant framework, defined by the FAO (1996) through its four pillars (food availability, access, utilisation and stability), offers a necessary, yet potentially insufficient, perspective. While evolving to incorporate nutrition and rights-based approaches, its typical application remains focused on quantifiable outcomes and often adopts technically oriented, market-based solutions without fundamentally challenging underlying power structures or the industrial food model (the very aspects food sovereignty critiques (Clapp,2021; Hospes & Brons, 2016; Lang & Heasman, 2015). Understanding the concept of food security is significant as it represents the prevailing framework which SADP likely operates within and aims to contribute to, providing a baseline against which food sovereignty concerns can be contrasted. For this study, critically investigating SADP through the two perspectives allows for a richer understanding of its actual impact beyond its stated food security objectives, particularly in the unique context of food system in Lesotho.

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)

The SLF (Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 2998, 2015) provides a valuable micro-level analytical tool for understanding household access to assets (human, social, natural, physical, financial capital), their vulnerability context (shocks, trends, seasonality), and the mediating role of institutions and policies (transforming structures and processes) in shaping livelihood strategies and outcomes. Its power lies in mapping household resources and constraints potentially affected by interventions such as SADP. Nevertheless, critics argue it can sometimes change the state of poverty and vulnerability by under-emphasising structural inequalities and power relations inherent in the "transforming structures" (Scoones, 2015). Although it is useful for identifying

farmers' asset bases, it benefits from integration with frameworks like political ecology and food sovereignty that explicitly foreground power dynamics and control over those assets and structures. In the context of SADP farmers, the SLF helps to map the tangible resources and vulnerabilities that the project aims to address, providing a micro-level perspective on how external interventions can reconfigure farmers' capital assets, yet it requires supplementation to fully capture the agency and power dynamics central to food sovereignty.

Political Ecology

This critical framework explicitly links environmental change and resource access to political economy, power relations, and historical context (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Robbins, 2019). It provides analytical tools to investigate how control over resources (land, water, seeds, markets) is contested, how environmental narratives are constructed and deployed, and how development interventions like SADP reconfigure power dynamics and access, potentially creating winners and losers and generating new forms of exclusion or resistance (Le Billon, 2001; Peluso & Lund, 2011). Consequently, political ecology complements food sovereignty's focus on local control by providing a robust framework for analysing the power-laden struggles surrounding resource governance and market integration within Lesotho's agricultural landscapes influenced by SADP. Applying a political ecology to SADP is significant for understanding how the project's market-led logic stands a chance to reshape power dynamics over agricultural inputs, land use, and market access for smallholders in Maseru, therefore providing a deeper, structural grounding for the observed farmer experiences.

Agro ecology

Since agro ecology is increasingly recognised as a science, a set of practices, and a social movement, it offers the practical and scientific underpinning for food sovereignty's call to "work with nature" and "build knowledge" (Altieri & Nicholls, 2017; Gliessman, 2016; Wezel et al., 2016). Its principles emphasise diversity, synergy, efficient resource use, resilience, soil health, and the co-creation of knowledge between farmers and scientists, offering concrete alternatives to industrial agriculture's reliance on external inputs and monocultures (Rosset & Altieri, 2017). Understanding agro-ecology is critical for evaluating whether SADP's "climate-smart" interventions align with deeper ecological principles promoting autonomy and sustainability or merely represent efficiency adjustments within the dominant input-dependent model. In Lesotho, a region where traditional farming often reflects agroecological principles, this framework is crucial for assessing whether SADP promotes genuine ecological resilience

and local knowledge (Pillar 5 & 6) or contributes to the erosion of agro-biodiversity and increased reliance on external chemical inputs.

Right to Food

While it may seem to be aligned, the legally codified Right to Adequate Food (ICESR, Article 11), which focuses on state obligations to ensure access (De Schutter, 2014; Ziegler, 2012), significantly differs in scope and political orientation from food sovereignty. The "Right to Food" essentially imposes obligations on states regarding consumption guarantees, often interpreted within existing market structures. Food sovereignty includes this right but broadens it radically to encompass the "right of producers" to the resources (land, seeds, water) and decision-making power necessary to produce food, framing it within a call for system change and democratic control instead of solely state-based guarantees (Beuchelt & Virchow, 2012). For this study, the "right to food provides both a legal and ethical baseline for state responsibility, against which the potentially disempowering aspects of market-centric development, as explored through the perspective of food sovereignty, can be critically investigated within Lesotho.

2.3 Conceptual linkage: Food Security and Food Sovereignty

The relationship between food security and food sovereignty is debated and characterised by fundamental ontological and epistemological differences, leading to areas of tension, divergence, and potential, albeit contested, complementarity (Hopes & Brons, 2016; Patel, 2009;). Addressing the first research question requires dissecting these linkages. This section goes beyond simply defining each term to rigorously analyse their fundamental assumptions, historical trajectories, and the practical implications of their differing policy prescriptions, especially for developing contexts such as Lesotho.

2.3.1 Comparing and Emphasis: Access vs. Control

The food security framework prioritises the assurance of sufficient access to food which is often measured quantitatively at national or household levels, frequently relying on market mechanisms and state interventions to achieve this (Clap, 2021). Conversely, food sovereignty emphasises the right of people to define and control their food systems, emphasising agency, democratic participation, and producer empowerment at multiple scales, but with strong grounding in local autonomy (Wittman et al., 2017). This represents a fundamental shift from mainly viewing people as passive consumers or beneficiaries (food security) to recognising

them as active political subjects and rights-holders shaping their food system (food sovereignty). This distinction is essential for understanding why market-driven interventions, while potentially increasing access, may simultaneously erode control, a central paradox explored through SADP farmer experiences.

2.3.2 Areas of Tension and Divergence: Policy, Power and Pathways

Considerable tension arises over preferred pathways and underlying assumptions. Food security frameworks often facilitate and/or actively engage in promotion of global trade liberalisation, corporate involvement in supply chains, and technological solutions such as high-yield varieties of seeds or Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) as strategy to enhance availability and efficiency of food. (Clapp, 2021). Conversely, food sovereignty critiques these strategies, viewing them as sources of dependency, inequality, ecological degradation, and erosion of local control, advocating instead for localised systems, protection for domestic producers from dumping, agro-ecology, and stringent regulation or rejection of corporate power in the food system (McMichael, 2014; Rosset, 2016). The scalar politics also differ; food security often operates via top-down national policies and international agreements, while food sovereignty places its focus on the bottom-up mobilisation strategy, decentralised decision-making, and challenges centralised state and corporate control over food governance (Schiavoni, 2017). The differing policy approaches are particularly relevant in Lesotho, where projects that are externally funded (like SADP) embody market-centric pathways, often in tension with the grassroots aspirations for local control and sustainable practices articulated by food sovereignty advocates.

2.3.3 Potential Synergies and Complementarities

A Contested Terrain

Despite these significant differences, some scholars debate that realising food sovereignty's principles (empowering local producers, fostering resilient agro-ecosystems, ensuring equitable access to resources) represents the most effective and sustainable pathway to attaining long term food security outcomes, specifically for disempowered communities (Holt-Gimenez & Shattuck, 2011; Mendes et al., Pimbert, 2018). From this perspective, food security becomes a by-product of putting food sovereignty into practice, addressing the root causes of hunger rather than merely managing symptoms. However, this synergy is highly argued, particularly by those who view food sovereignty's potential anti-market or protectionist stances

as detrimental to the affordable food access deemed central to conventional food security, possibly leaving poor consumers disadvantaged (Bernstein, 2014; Agarwal, 2014). The relationship remains dialectical rather than simply complementary. This contested area is precisely what this study empirically examines within Lesotho: whether SADP's market integration, while pursuing food security, can genuinely contribute to the more transformative goals of food sovereignty, or if it intensifies existing tensions.

2.3.4 Food Sovereignty as a Critical Response and Alternative Paradigm

It is important to understand the concept of food sovereignty fundamentally as a political and epistemological critique of the perceived failures and inherent contradictions of the dominant food security paradigm, which, despite decades of interventions, coexists with persistent hunger, malnutrition, ecological degradation, and growing corporate consolidation (Patel, 2009; Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012). This paradigm offers not just a critique but also an alternative vision for organising food systems, rooted in different values (justice, sustainability, democracy, dignity) and demanding a fundamental redistribution of power. For a nation such as Lesotho grappling with systemic food insecurity despite multiple market-driven interventions, food sovereignty provides a crucial framework for evaluating the effectiveness and justice of these approaches from the perspective of smallholder farmers themselves.

2.4 The Agricultural and Food Security Context in Lesotho

Lesotho's specific agro-ecological and socio-economic realities provide a compelling context for examining the relevance and applicability of food sovereignty principles. A comprehensive understanding of these local conditions is essential for rigorously grounding the theoretical debates within the lived experiences of Basotho farmers.

2.4.1 Overview of Food Security Challenges

Chronic Vulnerability

Lesotho is faced with chronic food insecurity, a cyclical crisis which is often linked to extreme climate vulnerability (droughts, erratic rainfall, frosts), and deep structural poverty (FEWS NET, 2023; WFP, 2023). High dependence on imported food (approximately 70-80%), particularly staple grains such as maize and wheat from South Africa renders the population highly vulnerable to price volatility and supply chain disruptions, undermining national autonomy in food provisioning (FAO, 2023; SADC, 2024). Extreme land degradation, particularly soil erosion influenced by multiple factors such as topography, climate, and

historical land use patterns, limits agricultural potential and ecosystem resilience (Ziervogel, & Calder, 2003). These intersecting vulnerabilities highlight the limitations of conventional strategies completely focused on increase of production or market access within existing fragile structures. The profound challenges faced by Lesotho make it an ideal case for accessing whether market-driven interventions such as SADP, adequately address root causes of insecurity or merely treat symptoms, a central inquiry of this study.

2.4.2 Lesotho's Smallholder Agriculture

Constraints and Potential

In Lesotho, the agricultural sector is dominated by smallholder farmers operating under challenging rain-fed conditions with limited access to land (with an average holding typically less than 1 hectare and often fragmented) (World Bank, 2020; FAO, 2021). The sector faces systemic constraints including insecure land tenure (especially impacting women's rights and investment), poor soil health, lack of access to appropriate inputs (often leading to reliance on expensive or unsuitable external inputs) and finance, weak infrastructure (storage, processing, transport), limited market integration for many subsistence-oriented farmers, declining soil fertility, and often inadequate for top-down knowledge support systems (Phororo, 2015; Letete & Morojele, 2021;). Despite the multiple challenges, this sector holds significant cultural importance and harbours repositories of local knowledge (e.g., coping strategies, traditional seed varieties) and agro-biodiversity that food sovereignty principles explicitly seek to value, protect, and build upon (Nyéléni, 2007; Altieri & Nicholls, 2017). It is within this context of both constraint and inherent resilience that SADP's interventions are applied, thereby offering an essential setting for investigating the potential for alignment or divergence with food sovereignty.

2.4.3 National Policies and Food Security Strategies:

Conventional Approaches and Policy Gaps

Lesotho's national development plans (e.g., NSDP II) and agricultural sector strategies generally prioritise modernisation, commercialisation, climate-smart agriculture (often interpreted through technical efficiency lenses favouring external technologies) and market linkage facilitation (Government of Lesotho, 2017; Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security relevant documents). While aiming to improve food security, these policies tend to align with conventional, often externally influenced, development models that may not adequately

address the structural drivers of vulnerability or resonate strongly with food sovereignty's emphasis on autonomy, agro-ecology, and democratic local control beyond formal land titling efforts (Pule & Thabane, 2004; Fogelman, 2016). As noted in the Problem Statement, there appears to be limited explicit policy space or legislative framework supporting food sovereignty principles, creating a potential void where market-led interventions proceed without critical checks from this alternative perspective. This policy landscape is an essential part to understanding SADP's operational environment and the structural forces that shape farmers' experiences, therefore forming a critical backdrop for assessing the project through a food sovereignty perspective.

2.5 The Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP) in Lesotho

SADP represents a significant, externally supported attempt to address smallholder agricultural challenges within this context, operating largely within the conventional food security framework.

2.5.1 SADP Goals, Objectives, and Design: Market-Oriented Modernisation

Typically funded by international finance institutions such as the World Bank and IFAD, SADP aims to transition smallholder farmers from subsistence toward more commercial production by improving productivity and market access within targeted value chains (World Bank, 2016; 2021). Oftentimes, this framework's design includes components such as matching grants (requiring farmer co-investment), infrastructure development (irrigation, roads, collection centres), promotion of specific technology packages (often involving purchased inputs like hybrid seeds, fertilisers, veterinary drugs), capacity building (focused on technical production skills and basic business management), and fostering linkages with agribusiness input buyers (World Bank, 2024). The project operates on an implicit theory of change where the increase in market participation leads to higher income, thereby bettering the food security through increased purchasing power.

2.5.2 SADP's Selected Value Chains and Interventions

Focused Commercialisation

SADPs key feature is its strategic focus on specific agricultural value chains (e.g., horticulture like cabbage or potatoes, poultry, piggery, sometimes wool/mohair) perceived to offer significant commercial potential, often based on market demand assessments favouring urban or export markets (FAO, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Interventions are tailored to the perceived

needs of these specific chains, often promoting standardised production practices required by downstream buyers, facilitating contract farming arrangements, and supporting farmers' aggregation primarily to meet volume and quality requirements of commercial buyers, rather than necessarily strengthening diverse local markets (World Bank, 2016). This targeted approach inherently prioritises certain crops/livestock and farmers deemed capable of commercial engagement, potentially excluding others.

2.5.3 SADP's Implicit Food Security

The Income Pathway

The project's contribution to food security is primarily framed through the economic assess pillar of the conventional definition. By enabling farmers to generate more income from selling specific commodities in selected value chains, it assumes households will be better able to purchase food, thus improving their food security status (similar logic critiques in Oya, 2012 regarding contract farming). While potentially incorporating elements of climate resilience (climate-smart agriculture), in core strategy reflects a market-let, income-centric understanding of food security, rather than a broader food sovereignty approach focused on systemic control, ecological integrity, local food provisioning, and farmer autonomy.

2.6 SADP, Food Sovereignty, and Food Security in Lesotho: C Critical Assessment

Analysing SADP through the critical lens of food sovereignty reveals inherent tension and requires careful consideration of its potential impacts beyond conventional project metrics, directly addressing research questions 2, 3, 4. This section rigorously applies the theoretical insights from previous sections to SADP and draws on existing scholarship to anticipate potential alignments and misalignments.

2.6.1 SADP Strategy vs. Food Sovereignty Principles

Structural Misalignments

SADP's fundamental strategy, emphasises the integration of smallholder farmers into formalised often export-oriented or urban-focused value chains requiring standardisation and external inputs, appears structurally misaligned with several core food sovereignty principles. The emphasis on commercialisation may subordinate local food needs and culturally important crops to market demands (potentially contradicting Pillar 1: Food for People), possibly leading to specialisation that undermines the diversified farming systems crucial for household

resilience and nutrition (Pimbert, 2018). The promotion of standardised technology packages often resilient on external inputs (hybrid seeds, agrochemicals, commercial feed) can erode farmers autonomy, marginalise local knowledge, and undermine agro ecological practices (conflicting with Pillars 5 & 6: Builds Knowledge, Works with Nature), fostering dependence rather than self-reliance and resilience (Kloppenburg, 2010; Shiva 2016). Market integration, particularly through mechanisms like contract farming implicitly encouraged by value chain development, can shift control over production decisions (what to grow, input regimes, quality standards, price negotiation) towards powerful agribusiness firms and intermediaries, thereby weakening local control (Pillar 4) Clapp, 2017; Oya, 2012). Furthermore, the focus on specific value chains may exacerbate socio-economic differentiation, benefiting better-resourced farmers (successful adopters) while potentially marginalising others unable or unwilling to participate under the project's terms (challenging Pillar 2: Values Food Providers), and may divert resources and attention away from strengthening diverse, localised food circuits (Pillar 3) (Bernstein, 2010). Therefore, the extent to which SADP's strategy, in its current form, can genuinely place Lesotho on a path towards achieving food sovereignty principles appears highly questionable based on its dominant market-integration logic and potential power dynamics. This critical assessment sets the stage for the empirical examination into whether SADP's interventions in the context of Lesotho indeed manifest these theoretical misalignments, as explored in chapter 4 and chapter 5.

2.6.2 Opportunities in SADP Value Chains for Food Sovereignty

Potential Entry Points (Conditional and Contested)

Despite these structural tensions, certain project components or outcomes could, under specific conditions and often requiring active farmer agency or project reorientation, offer limited or contested opportunities for advancing aspects of food sovereignty (Addressing RQ3). Support for farmer groups/cooperative, if fostering genuine collective action, democratic governance, and member control rather than merely serving aggregation points for buyers, might enhance farmers' negotiating power and social capital, potentially strengthening local control (Pillar 4) (Chibanda et al., 2009; Gwiriri, Bennett & Lyne, 2020). Capacity building components, if broadened beyond purely technical/business skills for the selected value chain to include training on agro-ecological principles, farmer-let experimentation, and right awareness, could foster sill development aligned with Pillars 5 & 6 (Perfecto, Vandermeer & Wright, 2019). Infrastructure investments (e.g., storage, small processing units) could potentially be leveraged

by farmers to support local market development or add value locally, not just serve distant value chains, but this often requires dedicated support beyond the project's primary focus. Critically, whether the increased income generated through SADP (assuming it materialises and is significant) translates into greater farmer agency, investment in diversified and resilient farming systems, or improved household nutrition (Pillar 1) depends heavily on factors outside the project's direct control, including farmers' own priorities and market environment. These remain highly conditional opportunities requiring active navigation and potentially contestation by farmers and their organisations to realise any pro-sovereignty potential. This analytical framework for potential opportunities will guide the empirical data collection in Maseru, with an aim to understand if and how smallholder farmers in Lesotho utilise these limited pathways.

2.6.3 Challenges in SADP Value Chains for Food Sovereignty

Inherent Contradictions and Risks

Conversely, the value chain development model as typically implemented by projects of the nature of SADP presents substantial and often inherent challenges and risks from a food sovereignty perspective (Addressing RQ4). Integration into formalised value chains frequently entails adherence to stringent private standards (often set by powerful buyers) and adoption of prescribed input packages, potentially locking farmers into input dependencies (seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, specific breeds/feeds), thereby reducing their operational autonomy and flexibility (Pillar 4) (Reardon, et al., 2009). This reliance enhances vulnerability to climate stresses affecting standardised varieties, input price shocks, potential debt cycles, and the bargaining power of dominant market actors (Glover & Kusterer, 1990). The focus on standardisation for market requirements can speed-up the loss of agro biodiversity (certain livestock breeds, local crop species) and associated traditional knowledge, thus directly clashing with the principles of working with nature and building local knowledge (Pillars 5 & 6) (Altieri & Nicholls, 2017). The existing power inequalities within these chains often mean that value and profits accrue disproportionately to processors, retailers, and input suppliers, leaving smallholders bearing significant production risks with minimal control over final prices or terms of trade (Pillar 2) (McKay et al., 2014; Oya, 2012). Furthermore, projects of this nature often operate within existing structural constraints and lack mechanisms to address foundational issues central to food sovereignty, such as fundamentally insecure land tenure (beyond formalisation), lack of genuine farmer participation in national policy formulation, or

competition from cheap imports facilitated by broader trade policies (Pillar 4) (Hellinger, Hansen-Kuhn, & Fehling, 2001). The risk of deepening socio-economic differentiation within communities, favouring those able to meet project requirements, remains a significant challenge to the inclusive vision of food sovereignty (Bernstein, 2010). These inherent contradictions and risks establish a solid theoretical framework against which the perceived challenges reported by SADP farmers in Lesotho will be critically examined in the empirical chapters.

2.7 Lesotho's Agricultural sector

Lesotho's agricultural sector is the main source of livelihood for most of its rural population. It is estimated that a percentage of over 70% of households depends on agricultural activities (Famonaut, 2024.). The sector is mostly characterised by small-scale subsistence farming, with reliance on rainfall for irrigation, which makes it vulnerable unpredictable climate conditions (Nhemachana et al. 2016). The production patterns are dominated by staple crops, with maize taking over 60% of the cultivated land and sorghum occupying over 10% of cultivated land (Climate-smart agriculture [CSA], 2018). Livestock practices such as sheep and goat rearing for wool and mohair creates a critical component for economy in the rural areas (Climate-smart agriculture [CSA], 2018). Despite its importance for livelihoods, the sector's contribution to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has seen a significant decline, currently standing at approximately 6-8% (Nhemachena et al., 2016). Consequently, Lesotho depends on food imports, relying on 70% of its annual cereal requirements (Rantšo & Seboka, 2019).

The agricultural sector in Lesotho is faced with multiple challenges that restricts its growth and productivity. Some of the challenges it faces among numerous challenges are severe land degradation driven by soil erosion, overgrazing, and unsustainable farming practices (Nhemachena et al., 2016). The impacts of climate change, including erratic rainfall and recurrent droughts, further exacerbate the vulnerability of a system heavily reliant on rain-fed production (Famonaut, 2024). However, there are significant opportunities for growth, primarily through the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture, which has been shown to decrease household food insecurity and improve dietary diversity (Nthabeleng et al., 2024). There is also considerable potential in developing the country's abundant water resources for irrigation to mitigate the effects of inconsistent rainfall (Nhemachena et al., 2016). Recognising this potential, the Government of Lesotho has prioritised agriculture in its National Strategic Development Plan II (NSDP II). The plan's central aim is to catalyse a "Food

Security and Agriculture Revolution" as an attempt to transform the country from a consumer-based to a producer and export-driven economy (Government of Lesotho, n.d.). The main strategies in action by NSDP II include introducing climate-smart technologies, establishing robust irrigation systems, improving market access, and reviewing the land tenure system to encourage the commercialisation of agriculture (Government of Lesotho, 2023).

2.8 The Evolution of Lesotho's SADP: From Market Access to Resilient Commercialisation

Through its two phases, The Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP) demonstrates a strategic evolution from creating a market-led production to building a more resilient, climate-smart, and commercialised agricultural sector. This project is supported by international partners such as the World Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Government of Lesotho and has been pivotal in transforming smallholder farming (Newsdayonline, 2024; SADP II, n.d.). The initial phase, SADP 1, created the essential foundation by focusing on connecting farmers to markets and increasing productivity, creating a good environment e for a more ambitious and comprehensive second phase.

The initial phase of the project (SADP 1) was approved in 2011 with the main objective of increasing the marketed output of smallholder farmers (World Bank, 2016). Its aim was to help subsistence farmers to transition to more market-oriented agriculture by identifying and exploiting commercially viable opportunities. The project initially targeted four districts with high agricultural potential and later expanded to three more, covering most of the productive lowland and foothill areas. SADP 1 supported the development of cash crops and livestock, and improving market access, showed the potential for commercial smallholder agriculture in the country and provided crucial lessons for its successor.

Building upon the foundation of its initial phase, the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project II (SADP II) was designed to better the chances of success and address the challenges that face the farming sector in Lesotho, especially climate change (IFAD, 2020). It was launched in 2019 and expanded to all ten districts of Lesotho with a refined objective, which is to support the increased adoption of climate-smart agricultural (CSA) technologies, improve commercialisation, and improve diversity in diet among beneficiaries (SADP II, n.d.) This preceding phase of the project represents a significant shift towards building resilience in the

face of climatic shocks, which pose a major threat to Lesotho's rain-fed agricultural system (Newsdayonline, 2024).

A central pillar of SADP II is its Matching Grants Programme, which provides financial leverage to small and medium-sized agricultural businesses, farmer associations, and youth-oriented enterprises to commercialise their operations (Newsdayonline, 2024; Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, 2024). The program offers tiered grants which require a co-financing contribution from applicants to ensure ownership and financial discipline (Newsdayonline, 2024). SADP II emphasises a holistic approach by investing in post-harvest management, improving product quality and standards, and encouraging diversification into high-value products (Newsdayonline, 2024). SADP II aims to create a sustainable and profitable agricultural sector which can improve food security, create employment and improve rural livelihoods across Lesotho by integrating climate resilience with commercial incentives and a strong focus on inclusion (IFAD, 2020).

2.9 Synthesis and Research Gap

2.9.1 Summary of Literature and Core Tension

The reviewed literature establishes a clear conceptual and political tension between the prevailing food security paradigm, which implicitly guides interventions like SADP towards market integration and productivity gains using often standardised approaches, and the food sovereignty framework, which demands a radical shift towards democratic control, ecological sustainability, social equity, and the prioritisation of local needs and producers' rights (McMichael, 2014; Patel, 2009). The preceding sections have critically analysed these frameworks and highlighted their distinct ontological and epistemological foundations which demonstrates how their differing assumptions lead to conflicting policy prescriptions and outcomes, especially for smallholder farmers in developing countries.

Lesotho's context of chronic vulnerability and structural constraints facing smallholders makes it a critical site for examining the limitations of conventional approaches and the potential relevance of alternatives like food sovereignty. SADP, while aiming to improve livelihoods via value chain development, embodies a model whose compatibility with food sovereignty principles is theoretically fought with contradictions related to dependency, autonomy, ecological integrity, and power imbalances, despite potentially offering conditional, localised opportunities if actively navigated towards pro-sovereignty ends (Chibanda et al., 2009). This

critical and well-founded theoretical exploration establishes a great foundation for an empirical inquiry that can capture the nuanced lived realities of these tensions.

2.9.2 Identifying the Specific Research Gap

While evaluations of SADP likely exist measuring its impact against project indicators (yields, income, market linkages), and ample theoretical literature debates food sovereignty globally, a significant empirical gap persists. Specifically, there is a dearth of research that systematically employs the food sovereignty framework as an analytical lens to investigate the qualitative experience, perceptions, strategies, and outcomes for participating Basotho smallholders within SADP's selected value chains. How do these farmers perceive changes in their autonomy and control over their production process and resources (seeds, land, and knowledge)? How do they navigate the demands of market integration versus household food needs and ecological concerns? What opportunities and challenges do they identify specifically in relation to the principles of local control, agro-ecology, local markets, and empowerment? Understanding these lived realities through a lens of food sovereignty, moving beyond standard economic metrics to incorporate dimensions of power, agency and sustainability, is crucial but currently underexplored in the Lesotho/SADP context. Crucially, there exists a lack of research that systematically utilises the food sovereignty framework as an active, critical analytical lens to investigate the qualitative experiences, perceptions, strategies, and outcomes for the participating Basotho smallholder farmers that are specifically involved in SADP's chosen value chains.

Existing scholarship in Lesotho and similar Southern African contexts largely overlooks a comprehensive exploration of:

- How Basotho farmers perceive changes in their autonomy and control over their production process and resources (including seeds, land, and knowledge) as a direct result of SADP interventions. This moves beyond merely documenting changes in practice to understanding the meaning farmers attach to these shifts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
- How they navigate the often-contradictory demands of market integration versus their household food needs and ecological concerns, and what are the lived trade-offs and coping strategies employed in this negotiation. This delves into the complexities of farmer agency within externally driven development.

- What specific opportunities and challenges Basotho farmers identify in relation to the main food sovereignty principles of local control, agroecology, local markets, and genuine empowerment within the SADP framework. This requires a bottom-up perspective, valuing farmer knowledge and experiences.

Understanding these nuanced, lived experiences through a perspective of food sovereignty (moving beyond standard economic metrics to explicitly incorporate dimensions of power, agency, ecological integrity, and systemic control) is critical for a holistic evaluation of agricultural development interventions but remains significantly underexplored in the context of Lesotho and SADP. The literature review has rigorously established that this gap represents a critical void in understanding the deeper impacts and sustainability implications of market-driven agricultural development in vulnerable smallholder settings, especially from the perspective of the people most directly affected.

2.9.3 Contribution of Research

This study aims to address this specific empirical gap. By conducting a qualitative case study focused on SADP II farmers in Lesotho, it will utilise the food sovereignty framework not just as a theoretical backdrop but as an active analytical tool to interpret farmers' experiences. The research will investigate the practical usefulness and analytical purchase of food sovereignty concepts in revealing the nuanced impacts, trade-offs, potential contradictions, and emergent strategies embedded within SADP's value chain approach from the ground up. It thereby aims to contribute vital empirical depth to the ongoing debate about pathways towards genuinely just and sustainable food futures in Lesotho and similar smallholder context facing market integration pressures. Ultimately, this study seeks to provide a grounded, evidence-based contribution that amplifies farmers' voices and provides tangible insights for the formulation of more efficient agricultural policies in Lesotho.

Chapter Conclusion

This literature review has critically navigated the theoretical terrain surrounding food security and food sovereignty, establishing the latter as the core analytical framework for this study. It has demonstrated the conceptual divergence between these paradigms and contextualised this debate within Lesotho's challenging agricultural milieu and the specific intervention logic of SADP. The review highlights substantial theoretical tension between SADP's market-driven value chain approach and the core tenets of food sovereignty, identifying potential risks related

to dependency, loss of autonomy, ecological impacts, and unequal power relations, alongside highly conditional and potentially contested opportunities. By illuminating the gap in empirical research assessing SADP through the lived experiences of farmers framed by food sovereignty principles, this chapter firmly establishes the rationale and significance of the present study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to achieve the research objectives, which, their focus is on assessing the usefulness of the food sovereignty concept for understanding the experiences of farmers participating in the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project phase 2 (SADP II) in Lesotho. It specifically details the research philosophy which guides the inquiry, the qualitative research approach and specific case study design adopted, the methods for selecting the study area and participants, the techniques for data collection and analysis, measures implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, and the ethical protocols that controlled the conduct of this research.

3.2 Research Philosophy/Paradigm

A research paradigm is a fundamental worldview that guides the researcher, influencing 3 areas; methodology, ontological (nature of reality) and epistemological (nature of knowledge) assumptions that support the research (Lincoln et al., 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018). It provides the perspective through which the researcher views and interprets the world and the phenomena under investigation.

This study employed the interpretivist paradigm (closely associated with constructivism). Interpretivism suggest that social reality is not an objective, external entity but is actively constructed, interpreted, and experienced by individuals via their social interactions and subjective understandings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2011). Unlike positivist approaches that seek to identify universal laws and quantifiable facts, interpretivism stresses the importance of understanding the meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences of participants from their own views on different topics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Consequently, this research did not aim reveal a single objective truth about SADP's impact in universally generalisable terms. Instead, its primary goal was to investigate, understand, and voice the different meanings, interpretations, and lived realities that participating farmers in the Maseru district attribute to the project. This investigation was focused on aspects central to the food sovereignty framework, such as their perceived autonomy, control over productive resources (land, seeds, and knowledge), engagement with ecological practices, and experiences

within market relationships. Here, an interpretivist approach was important because concepts such as autonomy, empowerment, and sustainability are not fixed but are understood and experienced differently by individuals based on their unique experience-driven contexts and perspectives. This philosophical approach directly matches with the study's objectives, which focus on capturing these perceived opportunities, obstacles, and the nuanced alignment and/or misalignment between SADP interventions and food the principles of sovereignty, as unfolded and understood by the farmers themselves.

A qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate technique for this investigation because it allows for a detailed exploration of the subtle and often complex ways farmers experience and view the influence of SADP on the dimensions that are central to food sovereignty. These dimensions, including decision-making power, access to and control over traditional versus introduced seeds, dependencies created or alleviated by market integration, and the practicalities of ecological sustainability, are often deeply embedded in local contexts and individual experiences, and may not be adequately captured through purely quantitative metrics (Patton, 2015). This approach facilitates the gathering of rich, descriptive data necessary to assess the "usefulness" of the food sovereignty concept as an analytical tool for understanding these lived experiences.

3.3 Research Approach

In alignment with the interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative research approach was utilised for this study. Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a range of approaches that are primarily concerned with understanding the social world from the perspective of those within it, focusing on the why and how of human experience and behaviour, rather than just the what, where, and when (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Patton, 2015). It is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena in-depth, capturing the richness and nuances of specific contexts, and understanding participants' perspectives in their own words and through their own frames of reference (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.4 Research Design

Within the qualitative approach, the design that chosen to conduct this research is a qualitative is a case study design. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in-depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clear (Yin, 2018). It allows for an

intensive, holistic examination of a specific instance or bounded system, providing a rich, nuanced understanding of its complexities and dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this research, the case is defined as the experience of smallholder farmers participating in the second phase of the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP II) in relation to food sovereignty principles, particularly situated within the context of selected SADP-supported agricultural value chains operating within the Maseru district of Lesotho. This design was considered suitable for several reasons that comprise the following:

1) **In-depth Understanding:** It facilitates a deep and multifaceted exploration of how SADP interventions are perceived and experienced by farmers through the perspective of food sovereignty, allowing for the examination of alignment, contradictions, opportunities, and challenges in a detailed manner (Yin, 2018).

2) **Contextual Richness:** The case study design allows for the incorporation of the specific socio-cultural, economic, and ecological context of the Maseru district and the particularities of SADP's implementation there, which is significant for understanding farmers' experiences (Patton, 2015).

3) **Exploration of "How" and "Why":** It is a good fit for addressing the research questions that seek to understand how market integration influences farmer agency and why certain challenges or opportunities related to food sovereignty principles arise within the SADP framework.

4) **Bounded System:** The study focuses on a clearly defined group (SADP farmers in specific value chains in Maseru), making the case study approach manageable and appropriate for the scope of this dissertation.

Even though the focus is on the Maseru case, the design allows for the exploration of variations within this case (e.g., between farmers involved in different agricultural value chains targeted by SADP, or with varying lengths of project engagement), provided the data permits such nuanced analysis. The aim was not statistical generalisation but analytical generalisation, where the insights derived from this case might offer valuable lessons or highlight pertinent issues for similar development projects or contexts (Yin, 2018).

3.5 Study Area and Population

Study Area

Lesotho has 10 administrative districts. This research was conducted in the Maseru district. Specific communities or farming areas within the district were intentionally selected due to the documented existence of active interventions associated with the Sustainable Agricultural Development Program (SADP) and a notable density of participating farmers involved in the agricultural value chains pertinent to this inquiry (e.g., horticulture, poultry, as delineated in the SADP project documentation). The criteria for the selection of these distinct locales also considered logistical feasibility for the researcher and the opportunity to meaningfully engage with relevant farmer collectives or individuals participating in the SADP initiative within this district.

Target Population

A target population refers to the specific group of individuals or elements that the researcher is interested in studying and from whom data was collected to address the research questions (Babbie, 2020). For this study, the target population consists of smallholder farmers residing within the communities in the Maseru district, living relatively close to the SADP headquarters. They were officially registered and actively participating (or have recently participated) in the second Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP II) within the project's designated value chains (livestock farming, vegetable farming, orchards management, etc.)

To provide context for this target population, efforts were made to ascertain the approximate total number of SADP farmers fitting this description within the selected value chains in the Maseru district. This information will be sought from SADP project offices in Lesotho or relevant government departments like the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security. It is important to note, however, that as a qualitative study, the aim was not to achieve statistical representation of this entire population, but rather to gain deep insights from a selected group of information-rich participants (Patton, 2015).

3.6 Sampling Technique

The primary sampling technique used when selecting the appropriate participants for this study was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique which involves the researcher deliberately selecting participants based on their specific characteristics, knowledge, or experiences relevant to the research questions, rather than

through random selection (Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). This strategy was chosen because it allows for the identification and selection of "information-rich" cases (individuals likely to provide deep and nuanced insights into the phenomenon under investigation) (Patton, 2015). In this study, purposive sampling was preferred to ensure that participants had direct and substantive experience with SADP and could articulate their perspectives on issues related to food sovereignty.

The sample was constructed by identifying farmers who met the following specific criteria:

1) Resided within the Maseru district (preferably close to the headquarters for convenience).

2) Farmers who were officially registered and actively participating or recent participants in SADP II within one of the project's targeted agricultural value chains (e.g., horticulture, poultry, vegetables, dairy, etc.).

3) SADP farmers who were willing and able to provide informed consent to participate in in-depth interviews.

To increase the breadth of experience captured within this focused case study, elements of maximum variation sampling, a type of purposive sampling, were considered during recruitment (Patton, 2015). This included actively trying to include participants with diverse characteristics relevant to the study, such as differences in gender, age, the specific agricultural value chain they were involved in through SADP, and the perceived length or intensity of their participation in the project. This approach does not aim to represent statistical data. However, its aim is to capture a wider range of perspectives and experiences related to the central themes of the research.

As a supplementary technique, snowball sampling was utilised where appropriate. Snowball sampling involves asking initial, information-rich participants to recommend other individuals within the target population who also meet the selection criteria and might be willing to participate (Noy, 2008). This method was employed cautiously, primarily if certain segments of the SADP farmer population (e.g., women farmers, or those in more remote project sites within Maseru district) proved harder to reach through initial contacts with project facilitators or community leaders. This helped in accessing a more diverse set of participants who might not have been immediately visible.

The sample size for this qualitative study was not predetermined by statistical calculations but was guided by the principle of data saturation. Data saturation is the point in data collection when new interviews or observations cease to generate new conceptual insights or themes relevant to the research questions; essentially, gathering more data provides diminishing returns in terms of new information (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010). An initial target range of approximately 10-20 in-depth interviews was anticipated. This range is consistent with common practice in qualitative research aiming for rich, detailed understanding from a focused sample (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010). The final number of participants interviewed for this research was 10. This number was determined during the data collection process, based on when a rich understanding of the key themes was achieved and new information became largely redundant.

3.7 Data Collection Methods

Recognising the qualitative nature of the study and the aim for in-depth understanding, the primary method of data collection was through semi-structured interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

While conducting this study, semi-structured interviews were utilised as the principal method for collecting primary data. A semi-structured interview is a verbal interchange where the researcher uses a pre-determined interview guide consisting of open-ended questions, but retains the flexibility to deviate from the guide, probe for more detail, and explore emergent themes based on the participant's responses (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Kallio et al., 2016). This was the method of choice because it combines the structure needed to ensure key research questions are addressed across all participants with the flexibility required to explore individual experiences and perspectives in depth (Patton, 2015).

A detailed interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and the core pillars of food sovereignty (e.g., autonomy in decision-making, control over resources like seeds and land, access to and nature of markets, ecological practices, local knowledge, and empowerment). The questions were open-ended and designed to elicit participants' detailed narratives, perceptions, interpretations, and experiences regarding their participation in SADP.

The researcher conducted in Sesotho, the native language of the participants to ensure clarity, comfort, and richness of expression. With explicit, informed consent from each participant, interviews were audio-recorded to capture verbatim accounts. These recordings were

subsequently transcribed verbatim and then carefully translated into English by individuals proficient in both languages to facilitate analysis. The translation process involved cross-checking to ensure conceptual equivalence and retention of meaning.

Document Analysis

To supplement and contextualise the interview data, relevant publicly available documents pertaining to the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP) and Lesotho's national agricultural and food security strategies were reviewed. Document analysis involves the systematic examination of written, visual, or digital documents to extract meaningful information and understand their context and significance (Bowen, 2009). Documents reviewed included SADP project appraisal documents, implementation status reports (e.g., World Bank, 2016; World Bank, 2021), project briefs, evaluation summaries (if accessible), and national policy documents related to agriculture, food security, and development (e.g., Government of Lesotho, 2017). This analysis provided essential background on SADP's official framing, stated objectives, targeted value chains, and intended outcomes, as well as the broader policy environment within which the project operates. This information was crucial for situating farmers' experiences and for triangulating findings emerging from the interviews.

(Optional/Limited Scope Methods)

While desirable, methods like focus group discussions or extensive non-participant observation were considered secondary and pursued only if highly feasible and deemed essential within the time and resource constraints of the study, ensuring the core focus remained on the rich data from individual interviews.

3.8 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected, primarily from the translated interview transcripts and supplemented by notes from document analysis, were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA). Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (or “themes”) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). It is a flexible yet rigorous approach well-suited for understanding complex data sets and providing rich, detailed, and nuanced accounts of the data in relation to the research questions. The systematic six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) was followed:

1) **Familiarisation with the Data:** This initial phase involved repeated reading of the translated interview transcripts and document analysis notes. It included listening to audio recordings alongside transcripts where necessary to gain a deep and holistic understanding of the content and context of the data. Initial thoughts and potential patterns were noted.

2) **Generating Initial Codes:** This phase involved systematically identifying segments of data (phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) that were relevant to the research questions and the core concepts of food sovereignty. These segments were assigned concise labels (codes) that captured their essence (e.g., loss of seed autonomy, SADP market access benefits, concern over input costs, traditional farming knowledge values, collective bargaining power). This process was primarily inductive, driven by the content of the data, but also guided by the analytical framework of food sovereignty.

3) **Searching for Themes:** In this phase, the different multiple codes generated were collated and organised into potential overarching themes. This included investigating the relationships between codes and grouping related codes to form broader patterns of meaning that addressed the research questions (e.g., Market Integration and Farmer Autonomy, Ecological Sustainability within SADP, Perceived Empowerment and Control). Mind maps and tables were used to create visualisation of these connections.

4) **Reviewing Themes:** The potential themes that were identified were then reviewed and refined. This involved checking the coherence of themes against the coded data extracts to ensure they accurately represented the data, and then against the entire dataset to ensure they captured the overall narrative. Themes were refined, merged, split, or discarded as necessary to create a robust thematic structure.

5) **Defining and Naming Themes:** Once a satisfactory thematic map was developed, each final theme was clearly defined, articulating its scope, essence and what aspect of the data it represented. Concise and informative names were given to each theme. This involved writing a detailed analysis for each theme, explaining its significance in relation to the research questions.

6) **Producing the Report:** The final step included writing up the analysis, which forms the focus of the Discussion and Findings (Chapter 4). This involved presenting the themes with clear explanations, supported by illustrative and compelling verbatim

quotes from the respondents (anonymised) to provide evidence for the interpretations. The analysis links these themes back to the research objectives and the broader theoretical framework of food sovereignty and relevant literature.

3.9 Trustworthiness and Accuracy

To ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings within the interpretivist paradigm, strategies adapted from Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework were utilised. These address credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

Credibility (Internal Validity): Refers to the confidence in the "truth" of the findings for the participants and context in which the research was undertaken.

How achieved:

Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation (adapted): Although full ethnographic immersion was beyond the scope for this research, sufficient time was spent in the field with two SADP-sponsored farmers to build professional relationships with participants and understand the context of SADP in Maseru.

Triangulation: Data from multiple sources (semi-structured interviews with different farmers, document analysis of project and policy reports) were compared to look for convergence and divergence in findings (Patton, 2015).

Peer Debriefing (Considered): Discussing emerging findings and interpretations with academic peers or supervisors that are familiar with qualitative research or the subject matter to provide an external check on the analytical process.

Rich Participant Quotes: Direct quotations from participants were used extensively in the reporting of findings to allow readers to assess the connection between the data and the researcher's interpretations.

Transferability (External Validity/Generalizability): Refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts or with other participants. In qualitative research, this is not about statistical generalisation but about providing enough descriptive detail for readers to make judgments about applicability to their own situations.

How achieved:

Thick Description: Provision of a rich, detailed description of the research context (SADP in Maseru), the characteristics of the participants (while maintaining anonymity), the data collection processes, and the findings themselves. This allows readers to assess the degree of similarity to other contexts and thus the potential transferability of insights (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability (Reliability): Refers to the stability and consistency of the findings over time and the extent to which the research process was consistent and documented.

How achieved:

Audit Trail: Maintaining a detailed record of all research activities, including methodological decisions, data collection procedures (interview guides, recording protocols), data analysis steps (coding frameworks, thematic development), and reflexive notes. This allows an external reviewer to follow the researcher's decision-making process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Clear Methodological Description: Providing a comprehensive account of the research design and its implementation in this chapter.

Conformability (Objectivity): Refers to the degree to which the findings are based on participants' experiences and interpretations, rather than the researcher's biases, motivations, or perspectives.

How achieved:

Triangulation: As described under credibility, using multiple data sources helped to confirm findings.

Audit Trail: The audit trail also supported conformability by making the research process transparent.

Reflexivity: The researcher engaged in ongoing critical self-reflection about their own background, assumptions, potential biases (e.g., pre-existing views on food sovereignty or market-led development), and how these might influence the research process and interpretation of data. This involved keeping a reflexive journal throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Adherence to rigorous ethical principles was paramount throughout the entire research process to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of the participants and to ensure the integrity of the research. The following ethical protocols were observed, drawing upon established ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects (European Commission, 2021):

1) **Ethical Clearance:** Formal ethical approval was sought and obtained from the **National University of Lesotho Review Board** prior to the commencement of any data collection activities. Necessary permissions from relevant local authorities or community leaders in the Maseru district were also sought and respected before approaching potential participants.

2) **Informed Consent:** A comprehensive informed consent process was implemented. Potential participants received clear and understandable information (verbally and, where appropriate, in a written information sheet, translated into Sesotho) about the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement (e.g., interview duration, topics), the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, how data would be collected (including recording the conversation and/or writing down their answers), stored, and used, and measures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Written informed consent (or recorded verbal consent for participants with literacy challenges, with a witness present if possible) was obtained from each participant before any interview commenced.

3) **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** To protect the participating farmers' identities, all personal identifying information was deleted from transcripts and study reports. Pseudonyms (e.g. Respondent 10. TS) were used for all participants and, where necessary, for specific communities or locations within the Maseru district to prevent deductive disclosure. All data (transcripts and notes) were stored securely on password-protected devices and/or in a locked room to make them accessible to only the researcher. The gathered data will be anonymised in any publications or presentations arising from the research.

4) **Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw:** Participation was voluntary. Participants were explicitly informed that they were free to decline participating in this study, to refuse to answer any specific questions they were not comfortable with, or to

withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences or explanation required.

5) **Minimising Harm and Maximising Benefit:** This study aimed at lowering any potential risks of harm (psychological, social, or economic) to participants. Interview questions were sensitively phrased and were conducted in an empathetic and respectful manner. The researcher was prioritising participants' comfort and well-being. While direct material benefits to individually participating farmers were avoided to prevent coercion, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of smallholder farmer experiences, which could indirectly inform more empowering and equitable agricultural development policies and practices in Lesotho.

6) **Transparency:** The purpose of the research, the researcher's role and affiliation, and how the findings would be used were clearly explained to participants in an honest and straightforward manner.

7) **Reciprocity and Feedback:** While direct payment for participation was avoided, the researcher considered appropriate ways to reciprocate the time and knowledge shared by participants. This included a commitment to share a summary of the research findings in an accessible format (e.g., a brief report in Sesotho, or a community presentation) with participating communities or relevant farmer groups, if feasible and desired by them, after the completion of the dissertation.

8) **Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity:** The researcher was involved in an ongoing critical reflexivity concerning their own background, identity, assumptions, and potential biases (e.g., as an academic, perspectives on food sovereignty, relationship to the study context) and how these might influence interactions with participants, data interpretation, and the overall research process. This was documented in a reflexive journal to enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings of this research, derived from a qualitative case study of farmers participating in the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP) within the Maseru district of Lesotho. This chapter unpacks the meanings, interpretations, and experiences that farmers attribute to their engagement with a prominent market-led development intervention. The central analytical tool that guides this inquiry is the framework of food sovereignty, which is systematically applied to address the research question and objectives for this study. The findings presented here directly address the study's core research questions by exploring the extent to which SADP's strategy aligns with or diverges from food sovereignty principles, and by identifying the key opportunities and challenges that farmers perceive in their journey towards what they define as a secure and dignified livelihood.

The data was collected from the in-depth interviews with 10 farmers participating or have recently participated in the SADP II project. The participating farmers had an age range of 31 – 61, with 3 participants being in the range of 30 – 39, 4 participants in a range of 40 – 49, 1 participant in a range of 50 – 59 and finally, 1 participant in a range of 61+). On a total of 10 participants, 6 participants had tertiary education, 3 had high school level education (COSC/LGCSE) and only one had primary level education (junior certificate).

The main enterprises that were being promoted by SADP were: horticulture (vegetables, fruit orchards, potatoes farming), livestock farming, agro-processing and value addition, agribusiness and youth entrepreneurship (lead firms and aggregators, youth-led agribusiness and service provision). From the 10 participants, 1 participant was into pig farming, 2 were into dairy production, 5 were into vegetable farming and finally, 2 were into poultry farming.

The findings are structured around four primary themes that summarise the core tensions and synergies between the market-driven logic of SADP and the principles of food sovereignty each theme directly contributes to providing answers for the study's research questions and achieving its objectives thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the farmers' experiences:

- The Promise of Commercialisation: Livelihood Aspirations and Perceived Benefits of SADP (This theme primarily addresses objective 2 by laying the groundwork for how SADP's strategy aims for food security, and objective 3 by identifying perceived opportunities).
- The Cost of Integration: Erosion of Autonomy and Deepening Dependencies (This theme addresses objective 2 by revealing misalignments with food sovereignty and objective 4 by providing details about key challenges to its principles).
- The Clash of Agricultural Paradigms: Modern Inputs vs. Ecological Knowledge (This theme addresses objective 2 by investigating the divergence in agricultural practices and objective 4 by highlighting challenges to ecological sustainability and local knowledge within the SADP framework).
- The Market Paradox: Supplying the Nation vs. Feeding the Community (This theme primarily addresses objective 2 by critiquing SADP's pathway to food sovereignty and objective 4 by exploring broader systemic challenges that hinder local food systems).

Collectively, these themes illuminate the profound usefulness of the food sovereignty concept as an analytical perspective. They reveal that for the SADP-sponsored farmers, the path to food security is a complex negotiation between the promise of market inclusion and the aspiration for genuine control over their land, labour and control over their production.

4.2 The Promise of Commercialisation: Livelihood Aspirations and Perceived Benefits of SADP

This first theme explores the primary motivations that draw farmers to the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP) and the tangible advantages they experience. SADP represented a crucial opportunity for the participants to transcend the perceived limitations of subsistence farming and engage with the formal economy. This aligns directly with the project's official objective to "foster the commercialisation of smallholder agriculture" (World Bank, 2016, p. 2) and "enhance agricultural commercialisation and nutrition in Lesotho" (World Bank, 2024). The promise of modernisation, increased productivity, and increased income was an influential and consistently articulated pull factor, forming the necessary background against which all other experiences are weighed.

The most frequently and enthusiastically cited benefit was to have access to capital through the project's matching grant scheme. This financial assistance was described as a life changing

opportunity, which enabled investments in infrastructure and technology that were previously unimaginable for farmers operating with minimal capital reserves. Respondent 10, a 31-year-old farmer whose narrative embodies the project's ideal participant, articulated this aspiration with clarity and passion:

> *"I wanted to be a modern farmer, not like my parents who struggled season after season with the hope for rain. I heard SADP could help with technology like tunnels and drip irrigation. For me, that was the dream. That is modern farming. The grant was the only way I could start a real business. I could never save enough money to buy even one tunnel on my own. So, I joined because I wanted to turn this piece of land into a real business, not just a garden for survival" (respondent 10. TS).*

Respondent 10 further explained how this investment directly led into increased production and marketability after joining SADP:

> *"It has been a total change. The plastic tunnels protect my crops from the first frost and the worst hail, so I can grow for more of the year when others cannot. My production has tripled. I have more to sell, and the quality is better (the peppers are uniform, no blemishes) which means I can get a better price. SADP gave me the tools to become a serious farmer" (Participant 10. TS).*

This sentiment was strongly made clear by respondent 9, a 35-year-old male poultry farmer. His experience displays how the project can help formalise and scale up existing, often informal, enterprises, a key goal of value chain development.

> *"I have always kept chickens, but on a small scale, maybe 50 or a maximum of 100 at a time, selling to neighbours. I wanted to expand, to build a proper, secure chicken house that could protect them from disease and theft. The matching grant was the key to scaling up my business... Now I have a modern house that can hold 500 chickens. They also trained us on feed management and keeping records. I can now supply butcheries in Maseru because I have a consistent supply" (Participant 9. CL).*

Respondent 9 testimony aligns with the project's reported outcomes, where support for infrastructure and capacity building is highlighted as key successes (World Bank, 2021). The

training in business management and technical skills, as mentioned by respondent 9, is central to the project's design. This aims to move farmers from intuitive, traditional practices to more calculated, systematic approaches, thereby increasing their efficiency and market-readiness, a transition that Letetet et al. (2022) identify as crucial for improving poultry productivity in Lesotho. Another farmer involved in poultry saw a dramatic, quantifiable increase in output, stating:

> "*My average outcome went from 1250 broilers per cycle before the project to 3500 after joining. The reason for the increased production is the training I was equipped with coupled with the equipment I was able to get through SADP (Participant 3. CF)".*

This quantitative leap in production is a powerful indicator of the project's success in meeting its commercialisation objectives from the farmers' perspective.

Furthermore, the project facilitated crucial market linkages. For isolated smallholders, accessing formal markets is a huddle, often nearly impossible to overcome due to issues of transport, quality standards, and lack of contacts (Barrett, 2008). SADP acted as a bridge, a function explicitly stated in its design to foster "linkages with agribusiness input buyers and output markets" and incentivise contract farming arrangements (World Bank, 2024). Respondent 10 described this as a professional milestone:

> *"Before, the biggest challenge was always selling. You would harvest and then hope someone would buy. Sometimes things would rot. The project helped us form a group, and they connected us with buyers. I present what I produce to them. Since joining the project, I have been able to connect to some retail store owners in Maseru. That is my main market. It feels professional" (Respondent 10, TS).*

A dairy farmer shared a similar experience, highlighting the stability and predictability that comes with a formal buyer, a stark contrast to the uncertainty of informal markets:

> *"I sell to the Lesotho National Dairy Board. Honestly, I feel like there are no challenges when I sell... once I deliver my product, I get paid on a set date. There is no chasing people for money" (Respondent 4. TF).*

Although respondent, 10 and respondent 4 share a similar experience when it comes to the market, all the other respondents prefer to take their produce to the market arranged by SADP. Respondent 2 and respondent 5 made similar statements:

> *"I sell the milk I produce to local supermarkets at stock price and to local people in my village. I operate this way because I have always sold milk at my farm even when I first started" (Respondent 2. FS).*

> *"My biggest market is the street vendors. Those are people and don't want to disappoint them because they have always been there for me since I began farming vegetables. I sell the rest of the remaining produce the people in my village" (Respondent 5. TT).*

In summary, this theme demonstrates that the SADP model provides clear and highly valued opportunities when viewed through a conventional food security lens that prioritises income and production. The project's interventions are perceived by farmers as powerful tools for increasing production, professionalising their operations, and securing higher, more stable incomes, thereby aligning with their legitimate aspirations for economic advancement and a more secure livelihood. This positive appraisal, directly supported by the project's own goals and reported successes (World Bank, 2021), is foundational to understanding farmers' engagement. It provides an important context for the more complex and challenging trade-offs explored in the subsequent themes, where the initial promise of commercialisation is weighed against the lived costs of integration into a system they do not control.

4.3 The Cost of Integration: Erosion of Autonomy and Deepening Dependencies

Although the promise of commercialisation is a powerful pull factor, this second theme reveals the profound costs connected with SADP's model of market integration. Emerging as a dominant and emotionally charged narrative across the interviews, this theme summarises a fundamental tension; the tangible benefits of increase in production often come at the intangible but deeply felt price of diminished self-determination and the creation of new, often problematic, dependencies. This erosion of control directly contradicts the food sovereignty pillar of "putting control locally" (Rosset, 2016) and challenges the neoliberal assumption that market integration is a straightforward path to empowerment.

4.3.1 Loss of Financial and Input Autonomy

A striking and consistent voiced injustice was the lack of genuine control over the matching grant funds. While the grant was the project's main draw, its administration was described as a rigid and disempowering process that undermined farmer agency and bred suspicion. Respondent 9, the poultry farmer who praised the project for her new chicken house, voiced this frustration with pointed clarity:

> *"The biggest challenge is the lack of freedom with the grant money. You do not get money in your hand. You are told which suppliers to use for building material, for day-old chicks, for the feed etc. You are not free to look for your own prices or to use someone you trust. I knew a local hardware store where some materials were cheaper, but I was forced to use a supplier that was SADP-approved who was expensive. It feels like they don't trust us to manage our own finances, like we are children" (Participant 9. CL).*

Respondent 3 shared a similar experience with respondent 9, voicing:

> *"One of the challenges I faced was that whenever I needed to build or purchase equipment for my chicken farm, SADP did not give me money. Instead, I was told to make a list of what I needed for SADP through its workers, can provide them for me. They ended up providing what was below by expectations (some equipment was low quality and cheap)" (Respondent 3. CF).*

This specific injustice is not an isolated anecdotal account. It directly echoes and is powerfully triangulated by documented allegations reported by the MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism. In one scathing report titled "Rot dashes smallholder farmers' hopes," it was revealed that farmers had lodged official complaints about SADP imposing "its own sourced" suppliers who charged extremely inflated prices (MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism [MNN], 2023). The report detailed how farmers who identified cheaper, alternative suppliers were explicitly denied the right to use them, leading to widespread suspicions of collusion between project management and preferred businesses. This suggests a systemic issue rather than an individual problem. The voice of another farmer in this study reinforces this, hinting at deeper issues of governance:

> *"The inspectors were... corrupt – they wanted to give the grant money to those who promised them a percentage cut. I found out and was not willing to let that happen, so my application was delayed for a long time" (Respondent 1. LB).*

Respondent 8, an elder farmer, viewed this system not just as a financial inconvenience but as a mechanism that fundamentally shifted power away from the farmer, emblematic of a deeper lack of respect for their capabilities and knowledge:

> *"They call it a "matching grant," but it feels more like a controlled voucher for their friends' shops. It is not an act of trust. It tells you that they believe you are incapable of making good decisions. It tells you to forget diversity. This SADP model tells you to forget all that. This means they do not provide the farmers with what they need, but with what the project decides they should have" (Respondent 8. FG).*

Respondent 8's perspective resonates with academic critiques of top-down development projects that, while aiming to empower, can inadvertently create new forms of dependency and disempowerment (Oya, 2012). Oftentimes, this approach is a feature of projects designed by large financial institutions such as the World Bank, where trustee control and risk management protocols can be prioritised over genuine beneficiary empowerment, leading to project designs that are rigid, bureaucratic, and unresponsive to local realities (World Bank, 1988). The perceived lack of transparency and control over financial resources undermines the very sense of ownership the project claims to build. As one farmer suggested for improvement,

> "*Give the farmers the money directly and then monitor them in a strict manner. If someone misuses the funds, they should be kicked out. I feel like they should trust the serious farmers to make the best financial decisions for their own farms" (Respondent 9. CL).*

4.3.2 The Imposition of Production Choices

Beyond financial control, farmers described a more subtle but equally significant erosion of their autonomy over core production decisions (what to grow, how to grow it, and for whom).

The project's value chain approach, by design, incentivises specialisation in a narrow range of commercially viable products. This often contradicts farmers' desires to maintain diversified production systems, which serve as a traditional strategy for ensuring household food consumption and mitigating economic and ecological risks. Respondent 10, the young horticulturalist, who initially celebrated his commercial success, began to grapple with this trade-off:

> *"My family loves traditional spinach (moroho), pumpkins, and beans. But all the space in the tunnels and all my energy goes to the cash crops (the green peppers and tomatoes for the supermarkets). Now, I am cornered to buy these vegetables from the local market, which feels wrong. I am a farmer, but I am buying vegetables. The project is focused on cash crops for the supermarkets. Maybe SADP could also support a small part of our land for traditional vegetables, for our own families, so we don't have to choose between making money and eating our own food" (Participant 10).*

This dilemma vividly illustrates a core tension between the dominant food security model, which focuses on generation of income to purchase food, and the food sovereignty principle of prioritising "food for people" and culturally appropriate production (Patel, 2009). The specialisation described by respondent 10, while economically rational within the project's logic, increases his household's dependence on the market for its own nutritional needs and heightens his farm's vulnerability to price shocks or diseases affecting a narrow range of crops (Pimbert, 2018). This shift away from producing a diverse range of foods for the family towards monocultures for external markets is a well-documented concern in food sovereignty literature (Thrupp, 1998).

Respondent 8 saw this as a direct threat to the resilience of traditional Basotho farming systems and the cultural heritage they represent:

> *"The foundation of Basotho farming is diversity. You plant maize, and between the maize you plant beans and pumpkins. They help each other. This SADP model tells you to forget all that. It says, 'Plant only this one thing,' a field of one crop from one end to the other. It is a dangerous path because if a disease hits that one crop, you have nothing. My fear is for the next generation. Will they even know how to grow our traditional beans*

(liotlolo)? Or will they only know how to grow crops for a supermarket?" (Participant 8).

This sentiment points to a potential long-term consequence of such projects; the erosion of agro-biodiversity and the local knowledge associated with it, a concern passionately articulated by advocates for crop diversity in the region (Moteane, 2022). The intense focus on a few commercially viable crops can lead to the neglect and eventual loss of traditional landraces that are often more resilient to local climatic conditions and hold significant cultural and nutritional value.

4.3.3 The Burden of Risk and Debt

A third dimension of this cost of integration is the shifting of risk onto the farmer. While the project facilitates market entry, it does not protect farmers from market unpredictability or possible production failures. In fact, by promoting specialisation and high-cost inputs, it can increase these risks. Respondent 10 reflected on this newfound anxiety:

> *"When I was farming small, if the crop failed, it was sad, but we would survive. Now, I have invested so much. The grant was matched, so I took a loan for my share. The inputs are expensive. If there is a big hailstorm that rips the tunnels, or if the price for peppers crashes because of too much supply from South Africa, I am the one who loses everything. The project connects you to the market, but it doesn't protect you from it. The risk is much higher now" (Respondent 10. TS).*

This experience aligns with Bernstein's (2010) critique of agrarian change, where smallholders who transition to commercial farming are often squeezed between unpredictable output markets and increasingly expensive input markets, influencing the likelihood of the risk. The "matching" component of the grant, designed to ensure farmer buy-in, can also become a pathway to indebtedness if the commercial venture fails, creating a new form of vulnerability that did not exist under subsistence-oriented production. This demonstrates that although SADP may increase potential rewards, it also significantly raises the probability of failure, which is an exchange that is not always transparent at the outset.

In conclusion, this theme powerfully demonstrates the usefulness of the food sovereignty framework. It moves the assessment of SADP beyond a simple calculation of yields and income to reveal the profound costs of integration. The findings, triangulated through farmer voices,

critical media reports, and academic theory, show that the project's model, particularly through its grant management, value-chain focus, and risk transfer, fosters new dependencies and erodes farmer autonomy. This creates a fundamental contradiction where farmers may become more productive but feel less empowered, a direct challenge to the transformative aspirations of food sovereignty.

4.4 The Clash of Agricultural Paradigms: Modern Inputs vs. Ecological Knowledge

This theme explores the complex relationship between the agricultural methods promoted by SADP and the existing knowledge systems and ecological sensibilities of the farmers. It reveals a fundamental clash of paradigms between a "modernisation" framework reliant on external, purchased inputs and a more agro ecological approach that many farmers value for its self-reliance, low cost, and perceived sustainability. This theme directly engages with the food sovereignty pillars of building knowledge and skills and working with nature (Wittman et al., 2017), revealing that although the project's climate-smart agenda is well-intentioned, it can be interpreted by farmers as a route to chemical dependency and the devaluation of their own expertise.

4.4.1 Adoption of "Climate-Smart" Technology and its Dependencies

The respondents universally acknowledged the immediate utility of technologies such as plastic tunnels and drip irrigation for fighting against the severe climate shocks prevalent in Lesotho. These technologies were seen as essential tools for modernising and risk minimisation for their operations. However, this tangible benefit was linked to a new set of dependencies on external inputs, most notably hybrid seeds and agrochemicals, which farmers felt were part of an inseparable package. The shift from local, saved seeds to purchased hybrid seeds was a major point of contention and a source of deep anxiety for several farmers. Respondent 8, the elder farmer, was particularly vocal about the long-term implications of this change:

> *"They call the seeds they give us improved, but I believe that is a trap. You cannot save the seeds from these plants. The new maize, if you plant its seeds next year, gives you nothing. Next season, you must go back to the store and buy them again. Our traditional seeds, you save the best from your harvest. You are in control. These new seeds make us dependent on buying from the very same companies that sell the chemicals" (Respondent 8. FG).*

Respondent 8's point of view gives a grassroots voice to the academic concept of "seed sovereignty," which critiques the way corporate seed systems can erode farmer self-determination (sovereignty), increase debt, and undermine agro-biodiversity (Kloppenburg, 2010). His statement reflects a core principle of food sovereignty; the right of farmers to save, use, exchange, and sell their own seeds. The reliance on hybrid seeds, which often do not breed true and whose performance may decline after the first generation, forces farmers into an annual cycle of purchasing from farming-dealer networks, shifting economic and productive control from the farm to the marketplace.

This dependency was not limited to seeds. Farmers observed that these improved varieties often required a host of other purchased inputs to perform well, creating a technological treadmill. Respondent 10, the modern farmer, noted this with concern:

> *"Pests seem to love these new hybrid varieties more than the old ones. So now I must spray more chemicals, which is an added cost and a worry for the soil. On the fertiliser's bag, it says you must apply this much at this time. It feels like you are following a recipe from a company, not farming your own land" (respondent 10. TS).*

4.4.2 The Devaluation of Local and Ecological Knowledge

This growing dependency on external inputs was accompanied by a perceived devaluation of local and ecological knowledge. Farmers felt that the project's training and extension services were heavily focused on the technical application of the modern input package, with little room for integrating traditional or alternative practices. The knowledge flow was described as overwhelmingly top-down, a one-way street from the "expert" to the "beneficiary." Respondent 9, the poultry farmer, experienced this rigidity directly in her operation:

> *"SADP determines how I should practice agriculture. I must use their recommended feeds and their recommended veterinary suppliers. The cost of commercial feed is always rising. For years, I supplemented my chickens' diet with local plants that keep them healthy and reduce costs. When I told the SADP inspector about this, he was not interested. He just recommended following their formula strictly for best results. There is little space for mixing what we know with what they are teaching.*

Knowledge only flows in one direction (from them to us)" (Respondent 9. CL).

Respondent 9's account is a powerful example of what is termed in food sovereignty scholarship a lack of a "diálogo de saberes" (a dialogue of knowledge). Unlike a hierarchical positioning where the former invalidates the latter, this concept calls for a respectful and synergistic co-creation of knowledge between scientific and traditional wisdom, (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014). This top-down approach not only derive farmers off power by framing their existing knowledge as obsolete or unscientific but also misses significant opportunities to build on locally adapted, low-cost, and sustainable practices. Another farmer added:

"I know how to make good compost from my animal manure and kitchen scraps. It makes the soil rich. However, the project's focus is all on the bags of fertiliser. They don't talk about compost. It's like that knowledge doesn't count because it doesn't come from a shop" (Respondent 5. TF).

This clash of models left many farmers in a state of deep ambiguity about the long-term consequences of the methods they were being encouraged to adopt. When asked if they thought farmers in Lesotho were using "right and safe" methods, the answers were filled with contradictions and concern. Respondent 10, the "modern" farmer, who was the project's biggest advocate in Theme 1, captured this uncertainty perfectly:

"I am using the methods SADP taught me, the 'correct' methods. However, I see the soil getting harder, and it feels like I need more fertiliser each year to get the same result. My father never used these things, and his soil was soft. I wonder if what is 'right' for production today is 'safe' for the land in the long run. I don't know the answer" (Respondent 10. TF).

Another farmer was more direct in his critique:

"*Most Farmers in this nation do not follow the correct methods of farming. Most of them abuse the use of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides. This leads to less fertile soil in overtime" (Respondent 1. LB).*

This concern is widely noticed in political ecology literature which has long linked input-dependent industrial agriculture to long-term land degradation and soil depletion (Blaikie &

Brookfield, 1987). The farmers' lived experiences thus support a central critique of the food sovereignty movement against the industrial agricultural model.

4.5 The Market Paradox: Supplying the Nation vs. Feeding the Community

This final theme explores one of the most striking paradoxes to emerge from the farmers' experiences. It reveals a profound disconnect between the project's success in integrating individual farmers into formal, commercial value chains and its impact on the broader food system at both the national and community levels. This theme highlights the inherent limitations of a commercialisation-focused strategy that prioritises production for distant, formal markets over strengthening local food economies, a central tension with the food sovereignty principle of "localising food systems" (Pimbert, 2018).

4.5.1 The Challenges of Formal Markets and Structural Import Dependency

While gaining access to formal markets was celebrated as a key opportunity in Theme 1, the reality of operating within these markets proved to be a significant and often demoralising challenge. The primary obstacle, identified consistently by farmers across different value chains, was direct and overwhelming competition with cheap imports, predominantly from South Africa. Respondent 9, the poultry farmer, described this ongoing struggle for market viability:

> *"Pricing is a huge challenge for me. My chickens are fresh, they are local. But they are on the shelf in the butchery next to frozen chickens from South Africa and other nations that are much, much cheaper. Customers often just look at the price tag and prefer to buy the cheaper ones. The SADP helps us get into the market, but it doesn't change the rules of the market. We are small fish in a very big pond" (Respondent 9. CL).*

Respondent 6, a 42-year-old vegetable farmer also shares a similar experience with respondent 9. He made clear that*:*

> *Honestly, we are in competition with South Africa when it comes to the market even when our production increases. Sometimes it is difficult to sell local products at our own prices because the nation imports a lot of cheaper products which last longer on the shelves." (Respondent 6. PB).*

This lived experience of intense price pressure is a direct reflection of Lesotho's deeply rooted reality of macroeconomics. National-level data from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO, 2019) consistently shows that Lesotho dependents heavily on imports for most of its food supply, with some estimates suggesting the country only meets 30% of its annual cereal requirements domestically. This structural condition, a legacy of regional economic integration that disadvantages Lesotho's producers, places local farmers in a structurally precarious position. Projects such as SADP that are focused on individual farm-level productivity, cannot by itself solve this national-level structural problem. As one farmer bluntly put it,

> "*Yes, Lesotho can feed itself, but not if the rules of the market are stacked against us. Not while the borders are wide open to cheap food" (Respondent 9. CL).*

Another farmer producing milk highlighted a similar vulnerability stemming not just from price, but from consumer perceptions and the power of established brands:

> *"Selling to supermarkets is a tricky situation at times because our local brands are competing with already well-established brands that people are used to, like the imported milk from South Africa. Consumers often trust imported goods more than local brands; they think the quality is better. It is a battle for the mind of the customer" (Respondent 2. FS).*

This demonstrates that market access is not merely a logistical issue of getting a product on the shelf; it is also a battle for consumer trust and loyalty in a marketplace saturated with foreign products, a battle that smallholders are ill-equipped to fight without broader policy support. This aligns with scholarship on private standards, which shows how market entry often requires not just meeting production criteria but also navigating complex branding and marketing landscapes dominated by large corporations (Reardon et al., 2009).

4.5.2 The Disconnect Between Commercial Production and Community Food Access

The most easily noticeable element of this market paradox is the disconnection between the farmers' individual commercial success and the food security challenges faced by their immediate communities. The value chain model, as implemented, is designed to be extractive (moving produce from rural areas to supply urban supermarkets and commercial hubs, often bypassing the local population who may lack the purchasing power to buy the very products

grown in their midst). Respondent, the successful young horticulturalist, reflected on this with a sense of unease and social dissonance:

> *"My success as a commercial farmer has not made my village more food secure. I produce hundreds of kilos of high-grade peppers, but very few of them are eaten by the people in my own community. They cannot afford the price I need to get from the supermarket. So, I load my truck and take it all to places closer to town. The project has connected me to a distant market, but it has disconnected me from my own local food system. It is a strange feeling to be a successful farmer in a village where people still struggle for food" (Respondent 10. TS).*

This powerful statement illustrates the critical difference between food security as an economic metric (Respondent 10's household income has increased, improving his access to food through purchasing power) and food sovereignty as a community-wide condition of control, provisioning, and resilience. His experience gives a human face to academic critiques that argue market integration does not automatically translate into improved local food security, especially when it shifts production away from local needs and diverse, informal local markets towards high-value, formal, and often distant ones (Clapp, 2020).

When the respondents were asked if Lesotho could produce enough food for itself, the farmers' answers were filled with a mix of optimism about their productive potential and deep pessimism about the current development model. Respondent 6, a vegetable farmer, offered a firm opinion rooted in a food sovereignty perspective:

> *"Of course, it can [feed itself], but not with the current model it uses. The current model promotes feeding the supermarkets instead of feeding the nation. To feed the nation, we must support farmers to grow what Basotho prefer to eat (food such as maize, sorghum, beans) and protect our local markets from cheap imports. We need to support the small markets in the villages, not just the big stores in the city" (respondent 6. PB).*

This perspective is supported by high-level food security analyses. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET, 2024) and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC, 2023) have always showed that a significant portion of Lesotho's rural population would face crisis (IPC Phase 3) levels of acute food insecurity, with hundreds of thousands requiring

humanitarian assistance. Significantly, recent assessments noted that even though food is generally available in markets due to stable imports, "food access is a major limiting factor due to high food prices," which severely reduces the purchasing power of the most vulnerable households (IPC, 2023). This provides a strong triangulation for the farmers' assertions. The current strategies, including SADP's focus on commercialisation for formal markets, fundamentally do not solve the national food security crisis because they do not address the core issue of access and affordability for the majority. The consensus among participants that many Basotho still struggle to access sufficient nutritious food reflects the poor reality detailed in these international reports. This theme thus reveals the structural limitations of a market-led approach, powerfully underscoring the analytical utility of the food sovereignty framework in distinguishing between producing commodities for a market and building a resilient food system for a nation.

4.6 Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

This section places the empirical findings of the study into a direct and critical dialogue with the theoretical concepts outlined in Chapter 2. The lived experiences of the SADP farmers in Maseru provide a rich, context-specific grounding for the abstract debates between food security and food sovereignty. The analysis confirms the profound analytical utility of the food sovereignty framework, not as a replacement for food security, but as an essential critical lens that exposes the power dynamics, trade-offs, and systemic contradictions inherent in market-led agricultural development. This discussion explicitly links the study's four main themes back to the research questions and objectives thereby demonstrating how each finding contributes to the overall aim of assessing the usefulness of the concept of food sovereignty.

4.6.1 The Allure of Modernisation and the Dominance of the Food Security Paradigm

The first theme, (The Promise of Commercialisation) powerfully supports the appeal and internal logic of the conventional food security paradigm. The enthusiasm with which farmers such as respondent 9 and respondent 10 embraced the opportunity for increased income, productivity, and market access demonstrates that the project's goals deeply align with their own aspirations for economic improvement This directly addresses research objective 2 by assessing how SADP's commercialisation strategy aims to achieve the state of food security, and research objective 3 by identifying the perceived opportunities. This perfectly aligns with the dominant development narrative, championed by institutions such as the World Bank, which hypothesise that transitioning smallholder farmers from subsistence to commercial

production is a primary strategy that could be used to fight poverty and food insecurity (World Bank, 2016).

The project's focus on generation of income to improve the access pillar of food security (FAO, 1996) is, from this perspective, a rational and effective strategy. The farmers' articulated words affirm that the ability to purchase food, pay for school fees, and invest in their homes are tangible and highly valued outcomes of their market engagement increase.

These findings act as a warning against an overly idealised or interpretation. Application of the food sovereignty framework that dismisses the genuine desire for market participation among smallholders. As debated by scholars such as Bernstein (2014), a blanket rejection of markets can ignore the harsh realities of agrarian life and the legitimate desire of farmers to escape the hardships and instabilities of production at a subsistence-level. The SADP farmers are not naive actors; they are making a calculated decision to engage with a system that promises a better life like respondent 10 stated: *I heard SADP could help with technology like tunnels and drip irrigation. For me, that was the dream. That is modern farming. The grant was the only way I could start a real business.* This study does not, therefore refute the potential for market-based approaches to deliver certain benefits. Instead, it uses the first alignment as a significant starting point to question what is being traded for these benefits, which is central to research objective 2 and 4.

4.6.2 The Sovereignty Deficit: Validating the Core Critiques of Food Sovereignty

It is in the following themes ("The Cost of Integration" and "The Clash of Agricultural Paradigms") that the analytical power of the concept of food sovereignty becomes most apparent. These themes directly address objective 2 by evaluating the extent to which SADP aligns with the principles of food sovereignty, and objective 4 by identifying the main challenges perceived by farmers. These findings act as a powerful empirical support of the core critiques levelled by the food sovereignty movement against the corporate food regime and its associated development models (McMichael, 2014; Patel, 2009).

Specifically, the "cost of integration" theme gives an empirical validation for critiques of top-down, market-led development that unintentionally undermine farmer autonomy. The experiences with restrictive grant management and imposed input choices, as corroborated by MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism (2023), resonate strongly with Oya's (2012) and Bernstein's (2010) analyses of how contract farming and value chain integration can shift

power away from farmers, therefore fostering new dependencies rather than genuine empowerment. The farmers' feeling of being treated "like children" (Respondent 9) or being dictated to (Respondent 8) directly contradicts the food sovereignty pillar of "putting control locally" (Wittman et al., 2017). This indicates a significant misalignment between SADP's strategy and food sovereignty principles (Objective 2), presenting a key challenge to farmer autonomy (Objective 4).

Furthermore, the tension between modern inputs and ecological knowledge empirically grounds the theoretical debates surrounding seed sovereignty and agro ecology. Respondent 8's critique of hybrid seeds (*They call the seeds they give us improved, but I believe that is a trap. You cannot save the seeds from these plants. The new maize, if you plant its seeds next year, gives you nothing. Next season, you must go back to the store and buy them again. Our traditional seeds, you save the best from your harvest. You are in control. These new seeds make us dependent on buying from the very same companies that sell the chemicals" (Respondent 8. FG)* that cannot be saved is a direct articulation of Jack Kloppenburg's (2010) concept of seed sovereignty, highlighting how corporate seed systems sever the biological cycle of reproduction on the farm and replace it with an economic cycle of annual purchase. The farmers' observations of hardening soil and increased pest pressure, coupled with the project's disinterest in their knowledge of composting or local remedies, exemplifies the concern that the climate-smart agenda can become a pathway for the products of the agrochemical industry when practiced (Altieri & Nicholls, 2017). This top-down knowledge transfer, which dismisses local wisdom, represents a failure to engage in the "diálogo de saberes" (dialogue of knowledge) that Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2014) identify as central to a truly empowering, agro ecological transition. This poses a considerable challenge to building knowledge and working with nature, core food sovereignty principles (Objective 4).

Collectively, these findings demonstrate a significant sovereignty deficit at the heart of the SADP model. Even though the project may increase food security in the narrow sense of increasing a household's income to buy food, it does so by diminishing that household's sovereignty (its power to define its own food and farming system). This study empirically shows that farmer autonomy, local control, and ecological knowledge are not abstract ideals but are central to farmers' own conceptions of a sustainable and dignified livelihood.

4.6.3 The Structural Limits of Farm-Level Interventions

The fourth (final) theme (The Market Paradox) elevates the analysis from the farm level to the national food system, demonstrating the structural limitations of projects such as SADP. This theme is important for addressing objective 2 by comprehensively assessing the ultimate pathway of SADP towards food sovereignty, and objective 4 by revealing systemic challenges. The farmer's struggle to compete with cheap imports from South African reveals a fundamental contradiction in Lesotho's national policy. Although the Government of Lesotho promotes smallholder farmers' commercialisation through projects like SADP, it simultaneously presides over a trade and economic environment that places those same smallholders at a structural disadvantage (FAO, 2019). This supports the political-economic critique within food sovereignty literature, which argues that farm-level technical fixes are insufficient without addressing the broader political and economic structures that shape food systems (Wittman et al., 2017).

The fact that Lesotho is mainly imports, with a significant portion of its population facing crisis levels of food insecurity despite these interventions, underscores this point with clarity. The IPC analysis, which points to high food prices and lack of access as the primary drivers of food insecurity in Lesotho, perfectly triangulates the farmers' lived experiences. Respondent 10's poignant reflection (that his commercial success has disconnected him from his community's food system) is the ultimate illustration of this paradox. It shows that market integration, as currently structured, can lead to the extraction of value and produce from rural areas to serve urban and elite markets, without necessarily improving food access for the rural poor (Clapp, 2020).

This finding directly challenges the implicit theory of change within SADP, which assumes that increased production and income will automatically translate into national and local food security. The food sovereignty framework, by contrast, anticipates this disconnect by emphasising the importance of "localising food systems" and prioritising production for domestic consumption. Respondent 6's call to "feed the nation, not the supermarkets" is not simply a rhetorical flourish, but a sophisticated critique of a development model that has failed to align the collective need for a resilient and equitable national food system with the individual commercial incentives. This highlights a significant challenge (Objective 4) and reveals the limited extent to which the strategy that SADP currently uses can truly lead to food sovereignty for the nation (Objective 2).

4.6.4 Navigating Contradictions: Farmer Agency and the Interpretivist Lens

Finally, it is significant to discuss these findings by using the interpretivist paradigm that guides this study. The farmers are not presented as passive victims of a monolithic project. However, they are active agents making complex calculations, navigating contradictions, and articulating sophisticated critiques. Respondent 10 embodies this complexity as he is both the project's ideal participant and one of its most insightful critics, celebrating the modern technology while simultaneously mourning the loss of his family's traditional vegetables and worrying about the long-term soil health. Respondents 3 and 9 are grateful for the opportunity to scale up their businesses but are deeply frustrated by the lack of financial control.

This detail is critical. It illustrates that the relationship between food security and food sovereignty is not a simple binary opposition but a lived tension that farmers deal with daily. Their experiences show that it is possible to feel more food secure (in terms of income) while simultaneously feeling less sovereign (in terms of control). Understanding this requires a qualitative, interpretive approach that values subjective experience and gives voice to the people at the core of development interventions. Therefore, this study makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating how applying the concept of food sovereignty within an interpretivist paradigm can reveal the complex, and often contradictory, human realities that quantitative metrics of success may hide, thus achieving the primary objective of investigating the usefulness of the food sovereignty concept.

4.7 Chapter Summary

The findings presented in this chapter, triangulated through the rich narratives of SADP II farmers, official project documentation, critical journalistic reports, and established academic literature, offer a multifaceted and deeply nuanced answer to the central research question. The food sovereignty framework has proven to be an essential analytical tool, moving the assessment of the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project (SADP) beyond a simple cost-benefit analysis into a complex exploration of power, agency, and integrity, ecological and systemic design.

The analysis reveals a central narrative of profound trade-offs where the pursuit of one form of security (economic, through market integration) comes at the cost of another (autonomy, ecological resilience, and community provisioning). Theme 1 demonstrated the undeniable "Promise of Commercialisation", where SADP's provision of capital and technology aligns perfectly with its official goals (World Bank, 2016) and farmers' legitimate aspirations for

economic security and modernisation. Participants clearly articulated significant gains in productivity and access to previously unattainable formal markets.

However, this initial optimism was profoundly complicated by the subsequent themes. Theme 2, corroborated by credible investigative journalism (MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism [MNN], 2023), exposed the Cost of Integration through a systemic Erosion of Autonomy. The management of matching grants, the imposition of production choices, and the transfer of market risk were perceived not merely as support but as mechanisms of control, fostering new dependencies on project-approved suppliers and specific market-demanded crops. This directly contradicts the food sovereignty principle of local control (Rosset, 2016) and raises critical questions about the nature of empowerment in such projects.

Theme 3 highlighted the "Clash of Agricultural Paradigms," where the project's input-dependent "climate-smart" model was shown to conflict with agro ecological principles and actively devalue local knowledge, a process that risks replacing resilient local systems with fragile, external ones. The introduction of hybrid seeds and chemical inputs created new dependencies and long-term ecological anxieties, a tension well-documented in food sovereignty and political ecology scholarship that critiques the unsustainability of industrial agriculture (Kloppenburg, 2010; Altieri & Nicholls, 2017) and the hierarchical nature of development knowledge (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014).

Finally, Theme 4 used national-level food security data (FEWS NET, 2024; IPC, 2023) to confirm the farmers' lived experiences of a "Market Paradox". In this case, individual commercial success failed to translate into broader community or national food sovereignty due to overwhelming competition from cheap imports and a value chain structure that extracts food from rural communities to supply urban centres. This finding challenges the core assumption of market-led development that increased income automatically equates to enhanced food security for all (Clapp, 2021).

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the lived experiences of farmers getting assistance from SADP are not a simple story of success or failure, but a complex negotiation of contradictory pressures. They are navigating a path where the pursuit of economic security within a globalised, market-driven framework is often in direct tension with the aspiration for genuine sovereignty (control over their finances, their land, their seeds, their knowledge, and their local food systems). The food sovereignty lens has been indispensable in bringing these deep-seated tensions to the forefront, revealing the political, ecological, and social dimensions

often obscured by purely economic evaluations. The next chapter will discuss the broader implications of these findings, connecting them back to the theoretical debates outlined in the literature review and offering policy-relevant considerations for a more just, resilient, and sustainable agricultural future in Lesotho.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to assess the analytical usefulness of the concept of food sovereignty within the context of major market-led agricultural development initiatives in Lesotho. The findings have unequivocally demonstrated that food sovereignty is not merely a rhetorical slogan. Rather, it is an indispensable analytical framework that reveals critical dimensions of agency, power and sustainability that are often hidden by conventional development metrics. The lived experiences of the SADP farmers in Maseru paint portray a central paradox in contemporary agrarian development; under certain circumstances, the pursuit of food security through market integration can undermine the principles of food sovereignty.

The SADP farmers are caught in a Faustian bargain. They are provided with the necessary to increase production and the access to markets they rightly desire, but in return, they give up a measure of control over their finances, their production choices, their seeds, and their ecological heritage. They are encouraged to evolve into being modern commercial actors in a national food system that remains structurally dependent on cheap imports, forcing them into an uncertain competitive struggle. They produce high-quality food that is often extracted from their communities to feed urban centres, leaving a strange silence in the local food system.

This study does not conclude that the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project is a failure because on its own merits, it has achieved successes. However, it concludes that the terms themselves are insufficient. Through the critical perspective of food sovereignty, this research argues it is unsustainable to develop an approach to agricultural development that creates new dependencies, devalues local knowledge, degrades ecological resources, and fails to build resilient local food economies. Achieving genuine, long-term food security for Basotho will require more than just commercialisation; it will require policy realignments and practice toward the principles of food sovereignty (a future where Basotho farmers have not only the means to produce food, but the power to define the systems that govern their lives and their land.

5.2 Implications of the Study

The findings and discussion presented in chapter 4 carry significant implications for theory, policy, and practice. This study offers critical insights that can inform more just and sustainable

approaches to agricultural development in Lesotho and similar contexts by grounding the abstract debate between food security and food sovereignty in the lived experiences of Basotho farmers.

5.2.1 Theoretical Implications

This research makes several contributions to the theoretical discourse on agrarian development:

Empirical Grounding of the Food Security vs. Food Sovereignty Debate: The study provides rich empirical evidence that moves the debate beyond a purely ideological confrontation. It demonstrates the two paradigms represent a real set of trade-offs for farmers on the ground. The findings suggest that market-led food security interventions can achieve their stated goals and objectives of increasing income and production but that these gains may be achieved at the expense of the core principles of food sovereignty; autonomy, ecological sustainability, and local control. This confirms the assertion that food sovereignty is not merely a different path to the same goal (food security), but represents a fundamentally different paradigm with different goals, values, and measures of success (Patel, 2009; Hospes & Brons, 2016).

Highlighting the Sovereignty Deficit in Market Integration: The study gives empirical weight to the concept of a sovereignty deficit. It reveals how projects designed to empower smallholders through their operational modalities (e.g., controlled grants, prescribed input packages), can create forms of disempowerment and dependencies. This contributes to a more crucial understanding of market integration which suggests that the key question is not whether to integrate, but on whose terms. It highlights the need to analyse development projects not only for their economic outcomes, but also for their impact on power relations.

Demonstrating the Analytical Purchase of Food Sovereignty: Above all, this research supports the primary assertion of the study (that food sovereignty is an immensely useful analytical concept). The study was able to reveal crucial issues by using its pillars (such as the loss of financial autonomy, the devaluation of local knowledge, and the disconnection between commercial production and community food access), suggesting that a conventional project evaluation, focused on its own metrics, would likely miss. It proves the framework's utility in revealing the hidden social, political, and ecological costs of conventional development models.

5.2.2 Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings present a clear challenge to the current path of agricultural policy in Lesotho and hold important lessons for development partners. While acknowledging the political and economic complexities, the following recommendations are offered to foster a more equitable and resilient food system.

For Lesotho's Government (Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security, and Nutrition; Ministry of Development Planning):

Recommendation 1

Integrate Food Sovereignty Principles into National Policy. Lesotho's current policies such as the Comprehensive National Agriculture Policy (CNAP) 2022-2026 and the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP), prioritise commercialisation and market connections (Government of Lesotho, 2017; Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, 2022). Even though these are important, they should be balanced with an explicit recognition and integration of food sovereignty principles. This would include:

Protecting and Promoting Local Markets: Formulating policies that supports and protect informal, village-level markets and not just formal value chains connected to supermarkets. This may include the investment in local storage facilities and small-scale processing infrastructure controlled by communities.

Reviewing Trade and Import Policies: While recognising regional trade agreements, conduct a comprehensive evaluation of how food import policies impact local smallholder sustainability and search for possible strategies (e.g., temporary tariffs on specific products during peak local harvest seasons). This could possibly provide a fair competitive environment for local producers.

Legislating for Seed Sovereignty: Develop a distinctive legal framework that protects farmers' rights to save, use, exchange, and sell farm-saved seeds, creating a legitimate space for farmer-managed seed systems to exist alongside commercial ones.

Recommendation 2

Reform Public Agricultural Support Programs. Interventions such SADP should be critically reviewed and redesigned. This may include:

Reforming Grant Mechanisms: Making a shift from restrictive, supplier-driven grant models to more flexible systems that genuinely empower decision-making and financial control, accompanied with robust, transparent monitoring and financial literacy training.

Adopting a "Dialogue of Knowledge" Approach: Ensure project training and service extension actively include and build upon local and agro ecological knowledge. This means moving beyond a top-down transfer of technology to a co-creation of solutions with farmers.

For Development Partners (e.g., World Bank, IFAD, WFP):

Recommendation 3

Expand the Definition of Success and Indicators for Monitoring. Project design and evaluation should move beyond narrow economic metrics (yield, income). Indicators should be developed to measure changes in:

Farmer Autonomy: Including control over finances, production decisions, and seeds.

Ecological Sustainability: Such as soil health, agro biodiversity, and reduced reliance on chemical inputs.

Local Food System Resilience: Including the availability and affordability of locally produced food in surrounding communities.

The WFP's new country strategic plan (2024-2029) targets to promote healthy diets reflecting Indigenous knowledge, which is a step in the right direction (World Food Programme, 2024). This approach should be deepened and expanded across all interventions involving food.

Recommendation 4

Provide finds to Agro ecology and Farmer-to-Farmer Networks. Allocate a significant portion of agricultural development funding to supporting farmer-led agro ecological innovation and strengthening farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange networks. In most cases, bottom-up approaches more cost-effective, sustainable, and empowering when compared to top-down technology packages.

For Farmer Organisations and Civil Society:

Recommendation 5

Advocate and Organise for Food Sovereignty. Farmer groups and supporting NGOs should:

Build a National Food Sovereignty Alliance: Create a coalition, like the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign, to promote the policy changes outlined above South African (Food Sovereignty Campaign, 2016).

Establish Community Seed Banks: Actively work to conserve, multiply, and distribute traditional seed varieties, building a practical foundation for seed sovereignty.

Raise Consumer Awareness: Launch campaigns to which aim to spread awareness about the value and benefits of buying local, culturally appropriate food, thereby building a domestic market and consumer base that supports a sovereign food system.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

The findings and limitations of this study open several important avenues for future research that could further enrich the understanding of agricultural development in Lesotho.

Quantitative Analysis of Livelihood Trade-offs: To measure the economic trade-offs identified in this research, a quantitative study is needed. Such a study could compare SADP participants with a control group of non-participants, assessing variables such as net income, levels of indebtedness, household dietary diversity, and expenditure on farm inputs. This would provide a clearer picture of the overall economic impact and test the hypothesis that income gains are offset by rising costs and risks.

A Comparative Study of Development Models: In future, comparative case study research between communities heavily involved in SADP and communities where alternative, agro ecology-based development models are being practiced, could be conducted. This would allow for a direct comparison of outcomes related to farmer autonomy, ecological resilience, food security, and community well-being.

Political Ecology of the Value Chain: A political ecology analysis of the SADP value chains would be highly valuable. This research could map the networks of power, focusing on the project-approved input suppliers and output buyers. It would explore the pricing structures, profit distribution, and mechanisms of governance within these chains to empirically test the farmers' perceptions of collusion and exploitation.

Consumer Behaviour and Local Food Systems: Research is needed to understand the demand side of the equation. A study on consumer attitudes, perceptions, and purchasing habits

in Lesotho regarding local versus imported food products would provide significant data for developing effective strategies to strengthen local markets.

Longitudinal Study: A longitudinal study that follows a cohort of SADP farmers over several years would be extremely useful for understanding the long-term impacts of the project on soil health, farmer indebtedness, and livelihood resilience long after the project intervention has ended.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Interview Consent Statement

Statement of Consent for Research Interview

Dear Prospective Interviewee,

You are invited to participate in a research interview for a study titled "An Assessment of the Usefulness of the Concept of Food Sovereignty in Achieving Food Security in Lesotho: The Case of SADP Farmers". This research aims to investigate the usefulness of the concept of food sovereignty in understanding pathways towards sustainable food security for SADP farmers in Lesotho. Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the interview without consequence or explanation. You may also decline to answer any question you prefer not to answer.

The interview will last approximately 30-90 minutes and will involve questions about your experiences as a farmer. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data transcription. The recording will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed upon completion of the study, typically within one year.

All information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. Your identity will be protected by assigning a pseudonym, and any identifying details will be removed from transcripts and research outputs. Your responses will be anonymised and aggregated with those of other participants, so individual responses will not be attributable to you.

The data collected will be used for a master's dissertation. Only the researcher will have access to the raw data.

If you have any questions about this research or your participation, please feel free to contact the primary researcher, Thuso Hendrick Mohololoholo, at thusomohololoholo@gmail.com. By proceeding with this interview, you indicate that you have read and understood the information provided, and you voluntarily consent to participate in this research.

Thank you for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

Thuso Hendrick Mohololoholo

Department of Development Studies

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions:

- When did you join the SADP?
- Why did you decide to join the SADP?
- What is the key agricultural products that you produce?
- How has SADP helped in increasing your agricultural production?
- Describe the nature of your contract with SADP.
- What have been the key challenges working under the SADP?
- How do you think these challenges be overcome?
- What are the key markets of your produce?
- What are the key challenges relating to selling your produce?
- In your opinion do you think Lesotho can produce food for itself? If yes, please. explain. If no, please explain
- Rights: Who determines what you produce?
- What foods do you prefer to cultivate but you are unable to cultivate?
- What challenges do you confront in the production process?
- What technologies do you use?
- Do you think Lesotho's farmers use the right and safe methods of production? give a reason for your answer.
- Do you think Basotho have access to food that is nutritional and dietary needs?