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The quiet erosion: What has happened to subsistence farming in South Africa?

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There is a gradual decline in households engaged in subsistence agriculture. What does this mean for food security and for households' wellbeing?

There is a quiet story unfolding in South Africa's rural and peri-urban landscapes, one that does not grab headlines in the way droughts, export bans, or commodity price spikes do. Yet it is a story that holds important implications for the country's food security: a gradual decline in the number of households engaged in agriculture.

Using data from the General Household Survey (GHS) (2009-2024) and Census 2011-2022, together with evidence from research on household production, livelihood diversification, social protection, and dietary diversity, we examine trends in household participation in agricultural activities over time. While the two data sources differ in methodology and should not be directly compared without caution, they provide useful insights into long-term patterns.

The data reveal a gradual decline in the share of South African households engaged in agricultural activities since the global financial crisis of 2008. This is not an alarming collapse, nor does it by itself demonstrate that food insecurity is increasing. Rather, it raises a more important question: What does the decline in household agricultural participation portend for household food security and wellbeing?

The decline in household agriculture represents not only a reduction in subsistence activity, but the erosion of a low-cost food security buffer. The issue is not simply that fewer households are farming, but importantly whether the food, income and livelihood functions previously provided by household production are being replaced by alternative opportunities that are sufficiently reliable and affordable.

Approach

This analysis draws on nationally representative data from the General Household Survey (GHS) for the period 2008-2024 and Census 2022. Agricultural participation is defined as households engaging in crop production and/or livestock keeping, regardless of scale or purpose. The unit of analysis is the "household". Descriptive trend analysis is used to

examine changes over time. All GHS estimates are based on weighted data to ensure national representation. Census 2011-2022 is used to validate broad trends, although differences in question framing and enumeration methods are acknowledged.

Reading the trend line

The accompanying graph (Figure 1) tells a story of resilience followed by slow retreat. In the years following the 2008 global financial crisis, approximately one in five households were involved in some form of agriculture ^[1]. Specifically, GHS data indicate that agricultural participation peaked at approximately 20% to 23% in the early 2010s before declining steadily in subsequent years.

That stability was not accidental because when times are tough, households often return to the land. A backyard garden, a few chickens, or a small livestock herd can serve as a buffer against income and food-price shocks. Farming, for many South Africans, is less about profit and more about survival or household security.

But since the peaks seen in the early 2010s, that picture has been changing. Gradually, fewer households have remained active in agriculture.

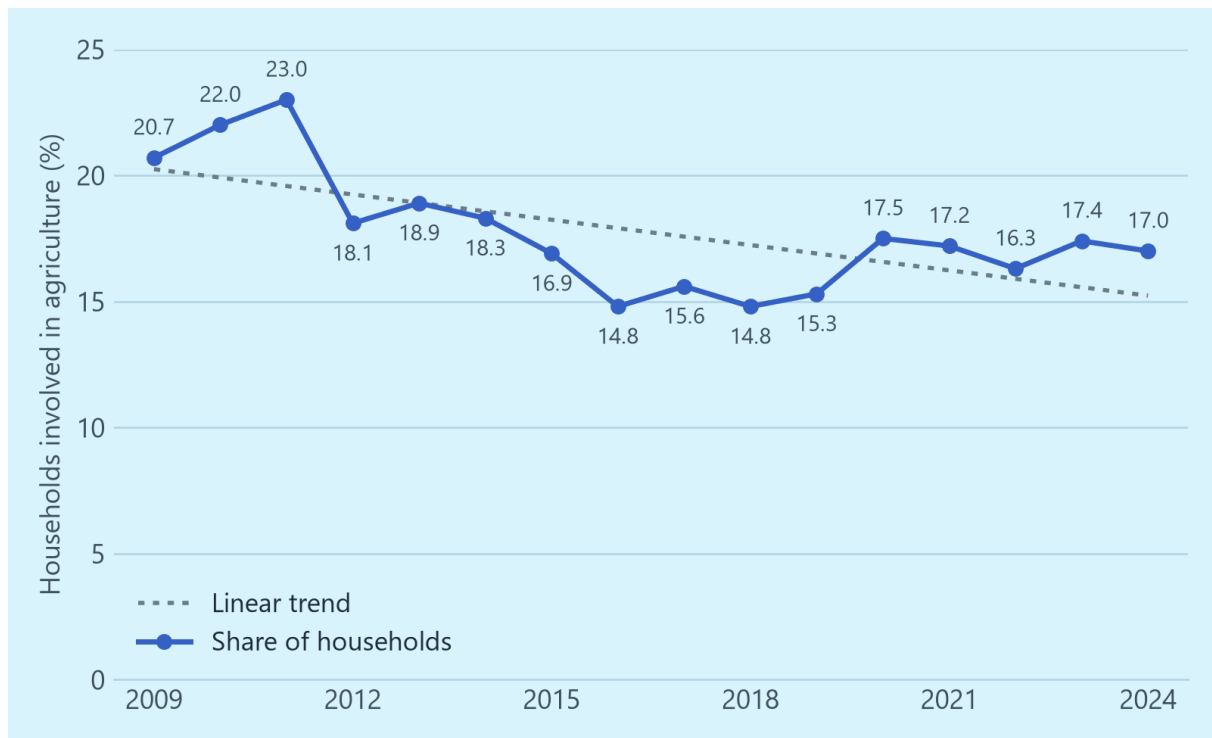
Recent GHS estimates place participation between approximately 15% and 17%. In 2024, Limpopo recorded the highest participation at 36.4%, followed by Eastern Cape (32.4%) and Mpumalanga at 32.0%. By contrast, participation was only 5.1% in Gauteng and 3.1% in Western Cape.

The Census provides an even clearer long-term comparison. Nationally, 19.9% of households, equivalent to 2,879,590 households, were classified as agricultural households in 2011. By 2022, this had fallen to 13.8% (2,463,429 households) ^[1]. While not strictly comparable, both sources point to a downward trend. The largest decrease was recorded in KwaZulu-Natal (28.2% in 2011 to 19.2% in 2022), the Eastern Cape (35.4% to 26.2%), Limpopo province (33.0% to 28.7%), Mpumalanga (24.5% to 18.0%) and the Free State (24.4% to 16.1%), provinces that have historically served as a backbone of smallholder and subsistence farming in this country ^[2].

The dotted lines on Figure 1 confirm the trend: a slow, steady decline that, while not precipitous, is unmistakable. However, a decline in the share of agricultural households does not necessarily mean agricultural households fell in absolute numbers. Population and household growth can alter the denominator. For instance, Limpopo had a large agricultural household base despite the decline in its share. The evidence points to a shrinking proportion of households in agriculture, but not necessarily to the disappearance of household agriculture itself.

It is not a mass exodus, but rather a quiet disengagement, occurring household by household, which makes it less visible but not less significant.

Figure 1: Distribution of agricultural activities by household in South Africa



Compiled by the authors from the GHS 2008-2026

Farming to eat, not to earn

To understand why this matters, it is important to consider the nature of households involved in agriculture in South Africa.

Data from the GHS consistently show that most households (approximately 70-75%) that farm do so to put food on the table, not to generate income. Over time, there has been limited transition from subsistence to market-oriented production, with only a small proportion of households reporting income from agricultural sales. When we speak of agricultural households, we are primarily talking about rural households planting crops, keeping livestock and growing vegetables – families for whom a successful harvest means the difference between a meal and hunger.

This tells us something important about what is lost when households reduce farming.

The Census 2022 data paints a vivid picture of farmers who are not commercial agriculturalists but farm for household resilience. The livestock ownership figures in 2022 reflects a similar pattern, for example, 60% of households owning cattle reported herd sizes below 10 animals ^[3], indicating limited commercialisation potential.

The implication is not that household agriculture should necessarily become commercial. Rather, it suggests that the value of this production must be understood beyond agricultural income. Thus a more immediate policy priority could be stabilising and supporting existing subsistence production systems.

Why the decline matters

This gradual reduction and shift in agricultural household participation has broader economic implications. First, it represents the possibility of weakening the country's first line

of defence against food insecurity. When a household can produce even a portion of its own food, it can reduce dependence on purchased food. This is particularly important when incomes are low, making households less vulnerable to food price inflation, less exposed to supply disruptions, and less dependent on already constrained incomes and social support systems. Rather, household production can complement the support systems. In an era where food price inflation has consistently outpaced general inflation since 2020, this buffer is not a luxury but a necessity ^[4].

Economic development often involves households moving away from own production as livelihoods become more diversified and markets become more important. A household may stop growing maize or keeping livestock because a household member has obtained employment. Moreover, the farming population is ageing and youth increasingly look to better paying opportunities in urban areas. Over time, households have increasingly combined multiple livelihood sources through employment, social grants, remittances and other sources ^[5].

The food-security consequences of such a transition depend on what replaces household production. If households move from subsistence production into stable employment, declining agricultural participation may occur alongside improvement in wellbeing. However, if farming declines due to deeper constraints such as limited access to water, land, inputs, and extension support ^[6], without gaining alternative sources of food or income, the consequences may be very different. This suggests that the decline in household agricultural participation may partly reflect a broader transformation in the way households make a living.

Research has found that subsistence-farming households already rely substantially on food purchases ^[7]. The message from the data is not one of crisis, but of emerging risk. Household agriculture continues to play an important role in food security, but its contribution may decline if current trends persist. This is especially the case given the high rate of unemployment in the country, when the household is without adequate alternative income and is still dependent on household production.

Urbanisation and changing settlement patterns

Urbanisation is another factor in the decline of subsistence agriculture. Agricultural participation is strongly associated with rural settlement. GHS 2021 data shows that 39.4% of rural households were involved in agricultural activities, compared with 7.4% of urban households. Stats SA notes that this pattern is likely related to differences in access to land ^[8].

This matters because South Africa's rural landscape is not static. Former homeland areas have increasingly experienced movement towards towns, peri-urban settlements, and urban centres. As households move or settlements become more urbanised, access to agricultural land may change. A household that once cultivated a field may retain a rural identity and have similar food needs but no longer the same physical opportunity to farm.

Therefore, the decline noted in Figure 1 cannot be simply interpreted as households choosing to abandon agriculture. Some declines may represent structural transformation in where people live and how they access food. This raises questions of de-agrarianisation and food insecurity. A household can become less agrarian without necessarily becoming more food insecure if its access to employment, markets, social protection, and purchased

food improves. Conversely, de-agrarianisation can create vulnerability when these alternatives are weak.

The policy question is therefore not whether every household should continue farming, but whether households have viable livelihood and food-security alternatives when they leave agriculture.

What happens to those who remain?

The number of agricultural households is only one part of the story. Understanding what happens to those who continue to farm is vital. The available evidence points to considerable diversity. A study using the five waves of the National Income Dynamics Study (2008-2017), found that subsistence farming by households is limited to certain food groups,¹ and relies considerably on food purchases, while greater diversification of products farmed is positively associated with dietary diversity ^[7].

This suggests that the important issue is not the number of households farming, but what those households produce, how much they produce and how production interacts with purchased food and other income sources.

Gender and youth: The missing dimensions

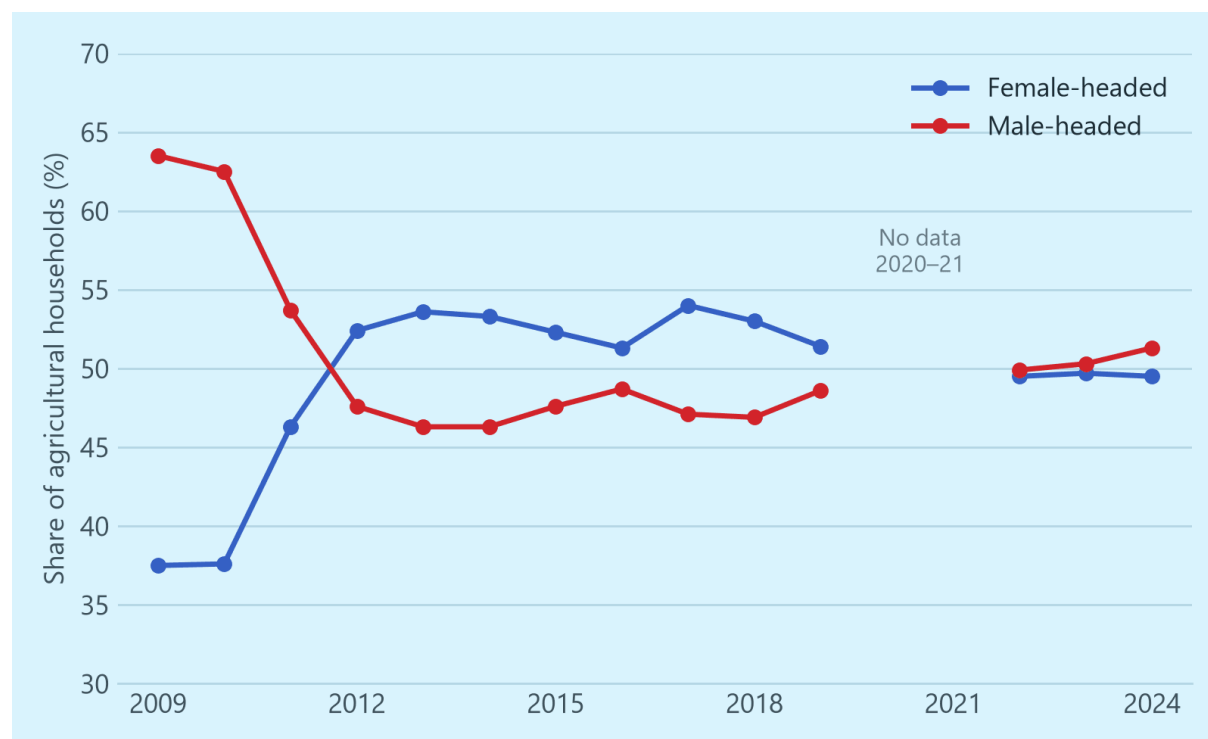
An additional concern is the changing demographic composition of agricultural households. Evidence from the Census provides a more stable picture than the annual GHS fluctuations. In 2011, women headed 47.9% of agricultural households. By 2022, this had increased to 53.9%. Stats SA reports that female-headed agricultural households were prominent in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, and Limpopo, indicating that women remain central to household agricultural production ^[3].

Evidence from the broader literature suggests declining youth participation in agriculture and persistent gender disparities in accessing productive resources ^[3], ^[6]. While the headline trend shows a gradual decline in household participation in agriculture, the data also raise important questions about who is exiting agriculture. The GHS gender series is interpreted with caution here. Differences in survey design, sample composition and questionnaire changes can affect the annual estimates presented in Figure 2. Therefore, Figure 2 shows that from 2009-2011, males dominated agricultural households by a significant margin of 63% to 38% females. Between 2011 and 2013, a dramatic shift occurred where female participation surged from 37.2% to 53.65%, which continued until 2013-2017.

A simple explanation for this trend is that women continue to play a substantial role in household agriculture. The observed increase in female participation may reflect women's continued responsibility for household food provision, while men increasingly transition into other forms of employment. This has important implications for food security and livelihood.

¹ Farm production was concentrated mainly in meat, cereals and vegetables, with substantially fewer households producing other food groups.

Figure 2: Sex of the head of agricultural households (2009-2024)



The role of youth in household agriculture is also important. If youth increasingly seek employment outside of agriculture while older members remain responsible for the household production, the future of small-scale farming may depend on an ageing farming population. This may weaken the transfer of farming knowledge, reduce access to labour, and threaten continuity of household food production practices, with possible consequences for food security and livelihood resilience.

A signal for policymakers

Even though the data does not suggest that South Africa is in the midst of an agricultural crisis, the trend line is a signal that policymakers would be wise to heed. We need to re-think agricultural policy.

For too long, the dominant conversation has been about a transition from small-scale to commercial farming. The reality is more nuanced. There is a vast middle ground of households for whom agriculture is neither a primary livelihood nor a hobby but a critical component of household security. These farmers do not need to transform into commercial enterprises; they need support to continue doing what they are doing, only more efficiently and sustainably.

At the same time, policy should not assume that every household must remain in agriculture. Where households are moving away from farming because they have found viable employment or diversified income sources, that transition may be entirely rational.

Policy responses should strengthen the reach, coordination, and effectiveness of existing agricultural support programmes, particularly in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Limpopo where agricultural participation remains relatively high but shows signs of decline. The focus should include practical constraints such as water, land, inputs, agricultural extension services, and access to local markets.

In addition, creating pathways for small surplus sales through informal and local markets could help some households transition from purely subsistence production to partial income generation. But support should also recognise the non-commercial value of household agriculture.

This means recognising that for millions of South Africans, a garden plot or a few chickens are not necessarily a stepping stone to commercial farming. It may simply be a way of reducing food expenditure, improving food availability, and coping with periods of economic stress.

The bottom line

South Africa appears to be gradually losing an important part of its household farming base. In a country facing high unemployment and growing food pressure, this deserves serious attention. For some, the decline in household agricultural production may reflect economic progress; for others it may represent the loss of an important food security buffer.

South Africa's food system is often viewed through the lens of commercial agriculture, but an equally important foundation lies in household production. As this base erodes, the country needs to understand what is replacing it.

Reversing or stabilising this trend does not require turning subsistence farmers into commercial producers, but it does require recognising and supporting the economic role they already play in contributing to household wellbeing.

Thus policymakers should not simply ask "Why are fewer households farming?" but rather "What replaces the food and livelihood security that farming once provided?"

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