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# A learning journey approach to food security in a South African foodshed

Despite South Africa's relative wealth and positive food balance at a national level, the consequences of the food system include severe malnutrition, unviable agricultural production methods, and stark disparities. Resolving this paradox cannot be accomplished through conventional top-down policymaking, planning and scientific inquiry, because there is no agreement on the cause of the problem, there are no clear solutions, and there are multiple stakeholders and conflicting interests. 'Learning journeys' – a participatory process and action research method which reveals systemic issues through direct experience of a local environment – may offer one option to address this dilemma. A series of learning journeys, designed and facilitated in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, have shown the benefit of collective sense-making and problem-solving around key issues facing the local area. By bringing together those with the power to make decisions at scale and those directly experiencing or responding to the issue, these experiential journeys focus on learning and formulating collective plans of action for change. While the series initially focused on mapping food and nutrition insecurity issues, it revealed a host of interconnected issues, including those related to the economy, human mobility and social cohesion. As such, this method moves beyond extractive research towards collaborative learning. This approach can, with concerted follow-up, result in locally appropriate bottom-up systems change and the building of social compacts through which agreements can be reached and kept.

#### Significance:

- Through revealing systemic issues in the local food system through direct experience of a local environment, learning journeys can co-produce knowledge in support of responses to the underlying complexity.
- By bringing together those with the power to make decisions at scale and those directly experiencing or responding to the issue, learning journeys enable learning and formulating collective plans of action for change.
- Learning journeys move beyond extractive research towards collaborative learning that can, with concerted follow-up, result in locally appropriate bottom-up systems change.

## Introduction

The South African food system can be characterised as a paradox.<sup>1</sup> The nation is the most industrialised in Africa, and is categorised as an upper-middle-income country. Its positive food balance is advanced by a sophisticated agricultural sector with an array of food, nutrition and agricultural policies. Nonetheless, food system outcomes include severe under- and overnutrition, precarious agricultural livelihoods, unviable agricultural production methods and stark territorial disparities. Resolving a food system paradox that presents itself as a wicked problem cannot be accomplished through conventional scientific inquiry and requires knowledge co-production. This is because there is no agreement as to the cause of the problem, there are no clear solutions, and there are multiple stakeholders and conflicting interests. Learning journeys may offer one option to address a context such as this.

Learning journeys comprise place-based curated conversations between different stakeholders in the food system, with researchers and policymakers among them. They provide a space for co-learning by all who participate who, with reflexivity, can identify and commit to new ways of working with the food system. Learning journeys are grounded in a constructivist approach to learning and can link stakeholder engagement with research design to achieve research impact. Bringing together those with the power to make decisions at scale and those directly experiencing or responding to the issue, these experiential journeys focus on learning and formulating collective plans of action for change.

This approach contrasts with traditional top-down policymaking and planning that have been shown to be largely ineffective in addressing complex challenges related to food systems. Decades of misplaced plans and solutions designed through top-down technocratic processes have failed to understand the lived experiences and intricate survival strategies of the people who are directly confronted with the reality of complex urban vulnerability. These approaches assume that problems can be solved by a single actor, missing the necessity of inter- and extra-governmental collaboration.

A series of learning journeys has shown the benefit of collective sense-making and problem-solving around key issues facing the local area. These learning journeys have highlighted the value of interactive, participatory methods for joint problem-solving and policy. This method moves beyond extractive research towards collaborative learning that can, with concerted follow-up, result in locally appropriate bottom-up systems change.



## Overview

### *A food security crisis*

The South African food system is still moulded by colonial-era injustices that were made worse by apartheid laws and the nation's subsequent isolation. The continuation of extreme wealth and income inequality resulting from multifaceted poverty and unemployment shaped by previous racial policies, as well as growing asymmetries in power, efficiencies and information across food value chains and spheres of governance<sup>2</sup>, are all caused by this history, as well as the adoption of liberalisation policies, reintegration into the global food economy, and the neoliberal paradigm supported by international donors<sup>3</sup>. These factors have contributed to the persistence of food and nutrition insecurity despite the availability of sufficient food and public health interventions<sup>4</sup>, as well as the degradation of an already vulnerable natural environment<sup>5</sup>. It is a complex crisis.

Within the food system, different stakeholders' positions and power result in competition, which affects the framing of food systems issues and the subsequent policy priorities.<sup>6</sup> As a result of disparate personnel and financial resources, stakeholders do not have the same voice or access to information. This limits the ability of some to engage with policy processes and to influence decisions, while privileging others. Despite efforts to promote dialogue and foster engagement for co-production of knowledge and improved food democracy, there are still limited opportunities for stakeholder involvement in the policy debate, which reinforces power asymmetries amongst contributors to the food system.<sup>7,8</sup>

Two levers have been proposed to improve food system governance.<sup>1</sup> The first is to improve inclusive stakeholder participation and enhance engagement to help address policy coherence and balance the current asymmetries in the food system. Although focused on installing the governance arrangements defined in the National Food Security and Nutrition Policy in terms of Food Councils, this has resonance with participatory processes at local level that could result in similar sub-national processes.

The second lever is to adopt a two-pronged place- and issue-based approach to food system governance. Food systems are ingrained in specific locations, and, in the context of South Africa, territorial inequalities are a major problem. Local scales are ideal for group participation in challenging power dynamics and identifying opportunities and barriers to sustainable development. To fully utilise multi-stakeholder participation in the design and implementation of food policies, local governments must be involved in such processes. It is this lever that learning journeys engage directly.

Here we examine the application of 'learning journeys' as a methodological approach to addressing complex food security challenges in South Africa's Western Cape region. Through a series of carefully facilitated experiential journeys in the Breede Valley Municipality between 2019 and 2024, we demonstrate how this participatory action research method enables diverse stakeholders to collectively explore, understand and respond to systemic issues within the local food system. We present case studies from four distinct learning journeys, analysing how they revealed interconnected challenges across food environments; fostered new relationships between government officials from different spheres of government, community members and researchers; and catalysed specific commitments to action. We argue that this place-based, collaborative approach offers important advantages over conventional top-down policymaking and planning by democratising expertise, building social compacts, and generating locally appropriate responses to food system paradoxes that conventional scientific inquiry struggles to address.

### *Learning journeys: Curated spaces for co-learning*

A 'learning journey' is a carefully designed process to develop a shared, grounded understanding of a system as part of a deeper learning process. It reveals systemic issues through direct experience of a local environment. A broad and inclusive range of participants undertake a physical journey to explore a complex system. The objective is to gain first-hand experience of challenges through a sequence of purposeful conversations, and investigate possible solutions to these challenges.

This provides both an opportunity to assemble a co-produced knowledge base, and a means for the co-design of interventions that can be focused at different levels, including responses that are 'territorial' or local. The underlying philosophy is that making a systemic transition needs an enactive approach which integrates different ways of looking into food systems. This recognises the embeddedness of all actors in the system including the researchers, relational engagement between stakeholders<sup>9</sup>, and an emphasis on listening and communicating<sup>10</sup>.

Significantly, learning journeys bring together those with the power to make decisions and those directly experiencing or responding to the issue, viewing those facing the brunt of food issues as hosts or active informants in bringing about sustainable solutions to such problems. The immersive experiences within different aspects of the food system enable participants to engage with the physical space and people's lived experiences through observation and conversation. In this way, a collective sense of the need for change is created – within and beyond the stakeholders directly involved – to identify strategies for affecting that change and to agree a course of action.<sup>11</sup>

## Methodology

The aim of the article is to evaluate the effectiveness of 'learning journeys' as a participatory action research methodology for addressing complex food system challenges in South Africa. Specifically, we assess how this approach enables diverse stakeholders to co-produce knowledge about food security issues in the Breede Valley Municipality through direct experiential engagement with the local food environment.

The learning journey methodology is grounded in multi-stakeholder engagement, community-based learning and rigorous qualitative fieldwork. It was designed to enable collaboration and dialogue<sup>12</sup>, especially on place-based and community-led perspectives in understanding the socioecological challenges related to food security<sup>13</sup>.

The research team, drawn from national and international universities, embarked on a place-based approach in 2019. The research team was multidisciplinary and included environmental geographers, political economists, public health researchers and urban designers. The team partnered with civil society organisations experienced in the design, facilitation and follow-up of the Southern Africa Food Lab and the Western Cape Economic Development Partnership to design and facilitate the dialogue process and learning journey methodology. These organisations serve as 'intermediary organisations' that facilitate stakeholder collaboration and assist with bidirectional knowledge brokerage.<sup>14</sup>

Our study site was the Breede Valley Municipality (BVM), a highly productive agricultural area in the Western Cape that forms part of the Breede–Olifants catchment area. After experiencing colonialism and land dispossession since the early 1700s, little remains of pre-colonial practices. Instead, the BVM has been a receiving area for migrants: from Europe and Asia since the 1800s, the former 'homelands' of South Africa since the 1900s, and more recently from other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Much of the produce is high-value export crops, but the region includes important staple food crops including broiler poultry. Worcester, the fourth-largest city in the province, is in the BVM with three smaller towns, including Touws River which is situated in the Karoo biozone.<sup>15</sup> Despite the availability of food, recent surveys show that over 25% of children under 5 years in Worcester suffer from malnutrition, and many of the adult population consumes meals low in nutrients, which has a negative impact on their health.<sup>16</sup>

The BVM was selected due to its generic characteristics as a rapidly growing urban area serving an agricultural hinterland. A memorandum of understanding between the University of the Western Cape and the BVM has been signed and a process has been established for the sharing of results and the co-production of knowledge. Previous activities include a large sample survey of dietary intake that was completed in early 2020, along with a food vendor survey. Additional research has included qualitative methodologies in the form of learning journeys, action research and in-depth interviews. Satellite imagery and administrative records have also been used. The learning journeys aligned to the work of The Nourished Child project undertaken in 2022.<sup>17</sup>

## Conceptual framework

There is a growing body of experience surrounding the design of social dialogues to create spaces that can be used to enable transformation.<sup>18,19</sup> According to Schäpke et al. one of their main goals is to

*generate social-ecological innovations aimed at challenging and changing existing roles and routines, power dynamics, relations among groups and networks, resource flows, as well as meaning and values (and culture) across different contexts and scales.<sup>20</sup>*

This necessitates a particular kind of facilitation – one that promotes discussion, sense-making, introspection, and reflexive learning, while encouraging the rephrasing of problems to enable the co-creation and co-realisation of solutions, or, at the very least, an attempt at experimentation and transformation.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the term ‘dialogue’ is employed as a catch-all to refer to a range of supported procedures that may also be used in knowledge co-production, participatory action research and future search procedures.

Traditional top-down policymaking and planning have been shown to be largely ineffective in addressing complex food security challenges, even when these form part of ‘consultative’ activities for local planning.<sup>22,23</sup> Interventions motivated by top-down directives frequently encounter opposition and fall short because they do not give stakeholders a sense of ownership during the decision-making process and are improper for addressing cultural sensibilities.<sup>24</sup> These approaches assume that problems can be solved by a single actor, missing the necessity of inter- and extra-governmental collaboration. Thus, decision-makers and researchers often fall into the trap of habitual thinking when responding to such crises, making assumptions about what is required without necessarily delving into the deep, structural underpinnings of the negative food outcomes of the complex system.

Embodying facilitated dialogue, the learning journey process of taking people out of their ‘comfort zones’ challenges automatic assumptions and habitual thinking can be ‘flushed out’ and new innovative thinking around solutions can emerge. Learning journeys are carefully planned processes intended to create ‘safe’ or ‘safe enough’ environments in which ideas can be promoted and developed. Based on a long history of action research, the underlying notion challenges who the experts are. By recognising that knowledge is also held by those embedded in systems, either formally or informally, the learning process embraces the full range of perspectives and opinions. The notion is both one of

democratising expertise, but also of ‘expertising democracy’ so that policy advice is derived from multiple sources.<sup>25</sup>

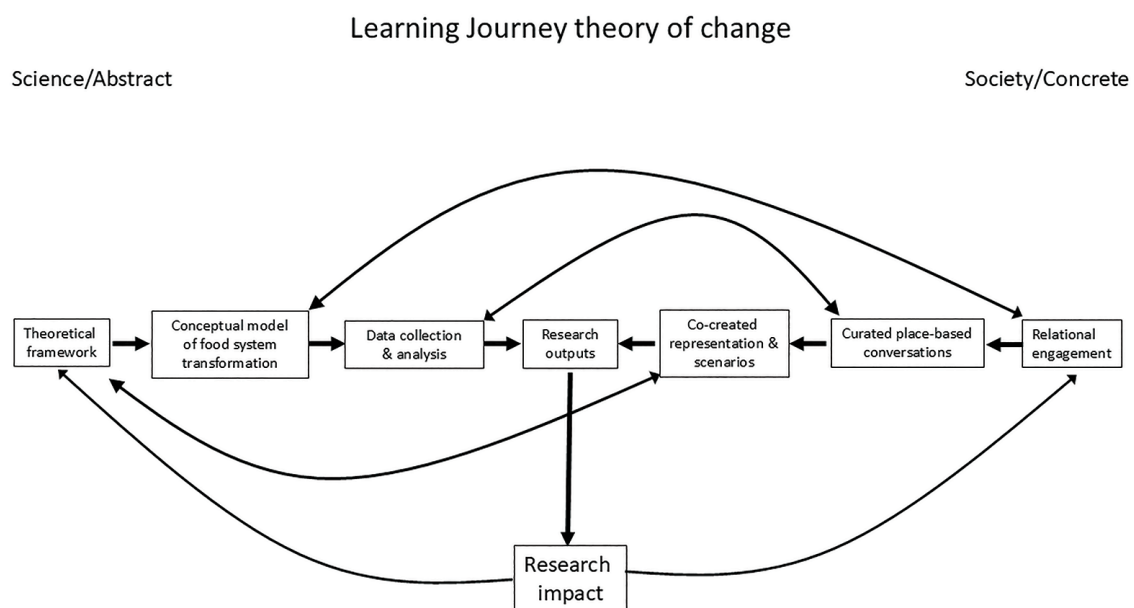
Learning journeys are a heuristic to link two important activities in contemporary research using the pedagogical tools familiar to researchers when in their teaching environments. Although multiple actions are possible in practice, an illustration of the process is depicted in Figure 1 as a theory of change underpinning learning journeys in a research context. The constructivist approach is widely used; this approach is one in which new knowledge is built on the foundation of stakeholders’ previous understandings. It encourages exploration, critical thinking and problem-solving, as those who are jointly learning interact with their environment and collaborate with peers to construct meaning.

Learning journeys concurrently initiate a co-learning process and the formal process of scientific discovery. The latter requires the preparation of a theoretical framework for the research: the interrelated concepts and theories that provide a structured foundation for understanding and analysing data concerning the selected topic. Conventional methodologies may have included consultation with stakeholders to guide some of these steps, but learning journeys require a systematic bidirectional flow between the knowledge and perceptions of stakeholders and these steps and learning in the research process. As a result, they go beyond simple consultation through curated place-based conversations between all stakeholders, with researchers being part of a continuum of stakeholders rather than external ‘expert’ observers.

A key element of each learning journey was an accompanying ‘learning lab’ – a space in which the research findings and co-created knowledge from the stakeholder engagement were brought together. This enabled the implications to be identified and, where possible, action plans to be developed. The process encouraged diverse input, engaged listening, creativity and shared understanding, enabling the exploration of complex issues and the development of innovative solutions. The bringing together of these methods into a structured process permitted the translation of research findings into outputs that could be easily communicated, widely disseminated and quickly exploited into actionable implementation.

## Results: Learning journey case studies

The first two learning journeys in Worcester focused on specific areas: Parkersdam and Durban roads, a lively commercial area in the town’s centre, and the neighbouring township of Zweletemba and informal settlement called Mandela Park. In the commercial area, the lens focused on the area’s history of settlement, forced removals and post-apartheid



**Figure 1:** An illustration of the learning journey theory of change.

renewal, and the commercial activity in the food sector. In Zweletemba and Mandela Park, activities were curated to explore the role played by early childhood development (ECD) centres, which are intended to ensure infants and young children receive adequate nutrition through direct provisioning, promote healthy eating habits, help educate caregivers and parents about the importance of nutrition, and promote the local sourcing of food. These areas were identified as integral elements within the town's food system. Parkersdam and Durban roads are characterised by wholesale and informal retail trade in fresh fruit and vegetables, small- and large-scale butcheries, several non-franchise fast food outlets, and large formal food retailers and wholesalers. Mayinjana Avenue in Zweletemba is known for its educational establishments, including primary and high schools, and a concentration of ECD centres. This is situated next to the informal settlement of Mandela Square, which also has several ECD centres. Stakeholders included the principals and members of formal and informal ECD centres at which food was provided to pre-school children.

A subsequent learning journey focused on 'governing the system' and took place in the local municipality offices and in the local offices of other spheres of government that influence planning, zoning, regulations and service provision associated with the food system of the BVM. Stakeholders were largely government officials from a cross-section of departments dealing with economic development to social relief. A third learning journey focused on the township economy following a horizontal transect along the Zweletemba Development Corridor and included spaza shops, street traders, formal cafés, restaurants, the local supermarket and the taxi association, which ferried commuters along the main thoroughfare. This started and ended in a Community Multi-Purpose Centre with catering provided by community groups.

At the request of the BVM, a fourth learning journey pivoted on the Karoo platteland, in the Touws River town and surrounding rural areas. Touws River was identified by municipal planners as being of specific concern because of the closure of local industry and its location in the Karoo. Originally a railway town, the decline of rail in the early 1990s resulted in economic decline, which was accelerated in the early 2000s. The broader politics of state-owned enterprises and Transnet have had a direct and profound impact on Touws River, with unemployment estimated at 80%. Stakeholders included civil society philanthropists, local business leaders, municipal officials, education and health workers and farmers.

Although each learning journey involved up to 60 participants, small teams of community members, government officials (local, district and provincial), academics, activists, food advocacy groups and ECD practitioners were constituted. The facilitation team encouraged participants to concentrate on both their external observations and internal experiences. Furthermore, they advised participants to consciously listen to messages from both these sources. In this way, the immersive experience would enable participants to explore the complexities of the food system, to gain first-hand experience of its challenges and opportunities with a broad and inclusive range of participants, hosted by people directly involved in the system.

### New perspectives

During the learning journeys, new perspectives emerged on the complexity of processes related to food. Rather than looking at the issue generally, the teams were able to identify place-based challenges – and potential solutions – breaking with traditional modes of thinking that focus on one-size-fits-all solutions. As an example, participants were empowered to take stock of existing local potential to “activate local assets through direct engagement with the local population” (KII1). These include physical assets such as vacant land and water infrastructure, institutional assets such as ECD centres and schools, knowledge assets such as farming expertise and indigenous food practices, and social assets such as community networks and support systems.

As one example of new perspectives on place-based challenges, one of the food system assets identified was the informal ECD centres that provide meals and care to pre-school children living in Mandela Square. The constraints related to existing zoning requirements that prevented the issuing of lease agreements, proof of ownerships or permission to

occupy certificates, which meant that informal centres could not register with the relevant national department and benefit from the subsidies that would otherwise be available. The possible solution was to make use of the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs' (CoGTA) Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), together with the BVM's Integrated Development Plan and the Municipal Land Use Planning By-Law to release this constraint. The learning journey process ensured that actions and responsibilities could be assigned. In 2024, the Manifesto for Early Childhood Development issued by a national civil society organisation, Real Reform For ECD, called for interventions similar to those proposed in BVM.<sup>26</sup>

At a broader level, the journeys also looked at service provision and infrastructure. As one local government official reflected:

*We plan as if we lived in Stuttgart or some other European city, not for the informal. Moreover, there is little infrastructure for subsistence farming, our lands and rivers are designed to support large commercial farming. (KII3)*

This could be changed, he said, “by supporting amenities like water collection points and building infrastructure close to taxi ranks, among other things” (KII3). Practical suggestions included ensuring that storage facilities are provided and that shaded areas, tables and benches be established to provide a more conducive environment for street vendors to operate.

While undertaking the learning journey in Durban Street, team participants interacted directly with those involved in the food system, learning that crime is a problem in the area for food retailers as much as for consumers. A senior official suggested that if law enforcement officials “saw informal traders as partners rather than ‘illegal occupants’, then an active surveillance system could be created for the safety and security of the CBD” (KII5). In the ensuing conversation, this ambitious idea gained traction as practical suggestions emerged about traders routinely engaging law enforcement officers about activities on the street, including the presence of known criminals.

Another reflection was that a great deal of the fresh produce sold by retailers was sourced at the Epping Fresh Produce Market, Cape Town, rather than locally where much of it was grown. Similarly, butchers stocked frozen chicken imported from overseas locations, despite Worcester being home to a large poultry company that contributes 6% of South Africa's broiler chickens, as well as several small- and medium-scale producers. These ideas led to discussions about re-establishing a local farmers' market in Worcester with links to small-scale growers and a proposal to engage the poultry company about the chicken value chain being more beneficial to Breede Valley.

The journey into Zweletemba and Mandela Park revealed unique food system challenges. Principals of schools bemoaned that undeveloped public land could not be used for food gardens, that there was no access to municipal water to irrigate gardens, and the inability of parents to consistently pay ECD centre fees due to the seasonal nature of their employment as farmworkers. Opportunities for the supplementary role of urban agriculture caught the attention of district agriculture officials. At the same time, the presence of a local non-governmental organisation ensured that some centres received shelf-stable nourishing food, although the taste was not always to the liking of the children. The journey also identified a vibrant small-holding farming sector in vegetables and livestock despite receiving no support from any sphere of government. This situation would benefit from a local farmer's market, as discussed above.

In the unique environment of Touws River, the learning journey sought to comprehend the relationship between the larger food system and niche solutions that have arisen in response to the high levels of hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition. With the support of a nearby concentrator photovoltaics solar project, both school gardens and a hydroponic farm had been established, generating much-needed livelihoods in the community. At the same time, the organisers of a local soup kitchen reported that they had received no support from the municipality or local groups as their beneficiaries included stigmatised communities such as



substance abusers and the long-term unemployed. Instead, they relied upon support from an international non-governmental organisation.

The learning journeys and subsequent labs were not without moments of contention. The learning journey in Parkersdam revealed that many food wholesalers and retailers were owned by first-generation migrants, largely from Bangladesh. Some participants lamented this fact, complaining that “locals” were sidelined by this development. With complex issues such as xenophobia, opening this space can lead to difficult conversations. This led to a fruitful discussion about what it meant to be considered “local” and the contributions that “outsiders” could make to a local food system. While progress was made, no agreement was reached on this issue during the learning lab, as this was a deeply contentious issue on its own in local politics. What was achieved was a stated acknowledgement that documented and undocumented migrants could contribute to food security, including through the provision of seasonal labour to commercial farms and as conduits of fresh produce through local channels. As part of an ongoing conversation, difficult topics needed to be constantly revisited to allow solutions to emerge, including topics that often polarised debates.

### Commitments

The learning journeys provided rich information that, in the subsequent discussions, led in part to concrete initiatives, some of which appear in the Final Fifth Generation Integrated Development Plan 2022–2027 that recently closed for public comment.<sup>27</sup> These opportunities hinged on supporting the development of social innovations combined with relationship building. A key issue was the need for collective reflection to discuss what could be done, followed by concrete statements of commitments, which the convenors were able to follow up on afterwards.

Despite agreement not being reached on some issues, particularly those of a politically sensitive nature, such as the ownership of informal trading outposts by immigrants, important progress was made in other areas through the learning processes. For example, a commitment was made by the provincial Department of Agriculture to work with the local ECD Forum in Worcester as well as several schools in Touws River to support food gardens in terms of training and the provision of inputs. Senior officials were mandated to visit these sites and to establish what was required to sustain this form of urban agriculture. Most importantly, long-term partnerships were established between government and civil society groups through the ECD and Young Child Forum to develop the ECD Policy for Breede Valley. A related commitment was made by the most senior provincial official in Agriculture to engage District Health on the question of people waiting in the long queues outside clinics and being able to access some form of sustenance, provided by a clinic garden and community kitchen.

Some councillors from Worcester and Zweeklemba agreed to follow up on how vacant land plots could be used for food gardens, initiating a wider debate on how the BVM could work to overcome national restrictions on making use of unused land. This raised the question of the need for a land audit, and an executive in the Department of Provincial Agriculture committed to supporting the municipality in understanding which land parcel lay with which sector or sphere.

Some participants argued strongly for the creation of a fresh goods market in Worcester to avoid retailers having to travel to collect fresh produce in Cape Town. The Municipal Committee responsible for Economic Development committed to placing this issue on their agenda and requested the relevant officials from Local Economic Development to provide technical input into the process.

A public commitment was made by the Municipal Manager for municipal staff to shepherd the development of the ECD Policy, mandating them to consider some of the ideas discussed. Stakeholders have since constituted a municipal Task Team that has set out to develop a municipal ECD document and strategic plan to expedite the registration process of unregistered ECDs. Several infrastructure projects were identified, with the result that a few ECD centres managed to obtain their registration process.

Overall, there was a broad recognition and appeal for greater coordination amongst local government departments and units to focus on nutritious food, raising a question about making this a core responsibility of a

dedicated unit, possibly the District or the Municipal Manager’s office. In closing one of the learning labs, an official reiterated the importance of finding opportunities for the Province to reinforce the efforts at district and local level, and in so doing, unlock additional resources. He acknowledged the significance of the fact that “the BVM had developed many ideas and initiatives in collaboration with non-state actors and that with provincial support, much could be done to strengthen these” (K115).

### Discussion

The goal of the learning journeys was to develop a deeper understanding of the food system and potential avenues for change and to mobilise support from diverse stakeholders, including businesses, civil society and national, provincial, district and local levels of government. As a senior manager related, learning journeys can help unlock new ways to address some of the town’s complex, interconnected challenges: “Government officials, the private sector and the local community must collaborate to ensure our people have access to sufficient, nutritious food and other resources” (K116). A number of initiatives emerged in which this was achieved, ranging from municipal policy through to supporting ECDs to register for grants and direct support of inputs to enable production. The IDP confirmed these commitments.

The issues facing BVM cannot be solved by stakeholders working on their own. This was echoed by a senior academic:

*It’s also not enough to just understand the problem. As the recent learning journey showed, we need the relevant actors to come together to find practical ways to address hunger and malnutrition. (K118)*

This was achieved in the various learning journeys as several actions emerged afterwards, driven by stakeholders who had committed to act. More than finding solutions, a sense of commitment and accountability emerged. As an example, a recurring element in the learning journey in Touws River was the feeling of being abandoned or cut off, which left a sense of disappointment in the community. It would take a persistent, long-term champion to investigate and drive new opportunities. Two local politicians, from different political parties, recognised this, making it clear that they would work with the diagnosis of the issues and support the various initiatives that emerged. It became imperative that government departments collaborate and interact effectively with non-state players at all levels to guarantee that policies, ideas and actions were transformative and complimentary to the system.

On reflection, a learning journey is an innovative research process whereby a broad and inclusive range of participants literally undertake a journey to explore a complex system – referred to as a ‘visit to the system’. Through this, participants gain first-hand experience of problems and apply innovative thinking to finding solutions. Another important function was that the learning methodology and process strengthened the capacity of researchers to interpret their findings. This helped the creation of models based on survey data to forecast the possible effects of alternative food and nutrition interventions.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, learning journeys can help to guide research questions to ensure that the topics and the findings respond to needs on the ground and not only academic imperatives. Working with the BVM, for example, highlighted the desire to surface more data about the potential linkages between the food system and economic activities such as tourism. Beyond the research, the Western Cape government was also able to expand their understanding of how to address challenges within food systems through a more nuanced understanding of the BVM, which was chosen as a test site for the province’s food and nutrition security plan, ‘Nourish to Flourish’.

While one of the great strengths of the learning journey process is its ability to create spontaneous outcomes, the design of the process is crucial, including who is involved and invited and the nature of the curated spaces, and ensuring that people not normally engaged were given an opportunity to speak and be heard. Opportunities were created for decision-makers to speak about their intentions in a public forum so as to create accountability and momentum. Indeed, participants

were selected to ensure broad representation, and spaces created for thoughtfully framed conversation without these moments being co-opted by those more comfortable talking in public. Consideration must also be given to the risks of raising expectations, both among communities and among government officials who may find that they are unable to keep to the commitments that they made during the learning journey.

Whilst the immersive, experiential nature of these journeys creates powerful moments of commitment, translating these into sustained action requires structural support. Our evidence reveals mixed outcomes: some concrete initiatives materialized, such as the provincial Department of Agriculture's commitment to support ECD food gardens and the formation of a municipal Task Team, whilst other commitments lacked clear implementation pathways.

There were several factors that enhanced follow-through. The continued engagement of intermediary organisations proved crucial in maintaining momentum beyond individual events. The public nature of commitments made during events introduced a form of social accountability that motivated action. Furthermore, our strategic selection of participants with decision-making authority proved essential for meaningful change.

However, there were limitations that constrained impact. Managing expectations remained challenging. If government officials are unable to keep to commitments made, it might potentially undermine trust. Without formal integration into administrative structures, actions often depended on individual champions rather than systemic change. Additionally, the time- and labour-intensive nature of learning journeys limited the follow-up capacity of the intermediary organisations.

Our experience suggests that whilst learning journeys excel at knowledge co-production and relationship building, they must be complemented by robust implementation mechanisms to fulfil their transformative potential. This includes documenting commitments with specific timelines, establishing regular accountability meetings, ensuring dedicated resources, and embedding commitments within formal institutional processes rather than relying solely on the goodwill generated through experiential learning. As with any policymaking or planning endeavour, there are no guarantees that the collection and analysis of evidence will result in action. However, the joint sense-making activities that are a key component of the journey do reduce the risk of evidence being easily disregarded, biased or selectively used.

Impetus beyond the 'learning journey' is sought by combining the new insights and new relationships with new commitment to act; participants are encouraged to publicly commit that they will do something. It speaks to the critical importance of including in the journeys those participants who have the power to have an impact on outcomes and make changes happen – both politically and technically. This reflects the broader intention to galvanise action through these processes; the intention is to move beyond learning about different kinds of interventions, or pathways of possible change, to action.

There are also ethical issues that need to be considered because learning journeys take participants into spaces where people live and work, where complicated dynamics of power and privilege play out. A respectful approach to these issues is critical, and there may be contexts in which the learning journey approach is not appropriate. In the case of the BVM, despite resources being available, it was agreed not to embark upon a learning journey in an area because of conflicts within the community which had previously led to violence. Basic issues relating to the safety of participants, ensuring that water is available when in hot environments, and providing safe transport must also be considered.

As a method to foster dialogue, the 'learning journey' has numerous applications where questions have become 'stuck', due to its ability to free people to step outside their established roles and experiment with new ideas, and be inspired to think differently. Although resources are not always available, as this approach is time and labour intensive and requires capacity to follow up, learning journeys have highlighted the value of these interactive, participatory methods for joint problem-solving and policy implementation. While the series initially focused on mapping food insecurity issues, it revealed a host of interconnected issues, including those related to the economy, mobility and social cohesion.

These intimate encounters with the reality of the issue humanise statistics, reveal what cannot be seen at a distance, and balance power relations.

## Conclusion

The importance of recognising place-based constraints in the food system and coming up with creative solutions is even more urgent given the negative impacts that climate change is having on food production in the BVM. If the food system in the BVM is to provide food and nutrition security, and livelihoods and economic inclusion in an environmentally sustainable way, it needs to be relocalised so that it can become more resilient to the challenges ahead. Such a resilient food system will emerge only through local cooperation, knowledge co-production, collective action and the creation of a shared vision of what a socially just and sustainable food system looks like. The recent food journeys and learning labs in Worcester were important steps in this process.

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## Data availability

Interview transcripts are available from the authors on request.

## Declarations

We have no competing interests to declare. We have no AI or LLM use to declare. Ethical clearance and oversight was provided by the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape (reference number HS22/8/26, approval period 29/09/22–28/09/25).

## Authors' contributions

S.D.: Conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, data analysis, validation, writing – the original draft writing – revisions, project leadership, project management, funding acquisition. J.M.: Conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, data analysis, validation, writing – the original draft, writing – revisions, project leadership, project management, funding acquisition. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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