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The role of agro-food production in
contributing to sustainable diets
in rural South Africa –
A qualitative study of farmers' perceptions

Master Thesis

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Science in Agricultural Sciences

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Abstract

Objectives: There is an urgent need in reshaping South Africa's agro-food system by addressing socio-economic, environmental as well as nutritional and health aspects. The aim of the study was to explore the role of agro-food production and their contribution to sustainable diets in rural South Africa by investigating existing agricultural practices of commercial and small-scale farmers which promote or hinder sustainable diets, as well as farmers' perceptions with regard to their role for rural livelihoods, food and nutrition security and environmental sustainability.

Study Design: The study follows a qualitative research design with in-depth interviews which were conducted with small-scale and commercial farmers. This was followed by discussions during which the perceptions of farmers constituted the priority.

Setting: The research area was the Vaalharts region embracing the Vaalharts Irrigation Scheme which stretches over parts of the Northern Cape and the North West provinces in South Africa.

Study Sample: Investigations included 24 in-depth interviews with 12 small-scale and 12 commercial farmers, as well as one focus group discussion with eight small-scale farmers and one meeting with two commercial farmers and one farmer's wife. The majority of interviewed farmers originated from the Phokwane Municipality of the Frances Baard District, Northern Cape.

Results: Vaalharts' dualistic farming sector has supplementing features. Small-scale farmers sell mainly to informal, local markets, whereas commercial farmers supply mainly formal national and international markets. Latter sector contributes currently strongly to the provision of employment and the local economy and infrastructure but future pictures tend towards less labour intensive production practices. Both sectors show awareness for environmental issues in varying extent.

Conclusion: Each farming sector is confronted with specific challenges and opportunities which are mainly based on political and economic issues. However, awareness and openness for local concerns are evident on both sides. This provides opportunities for a mutual cooperation and exchange which constitute the basis for an enhancement and promotion of a more localized food system.