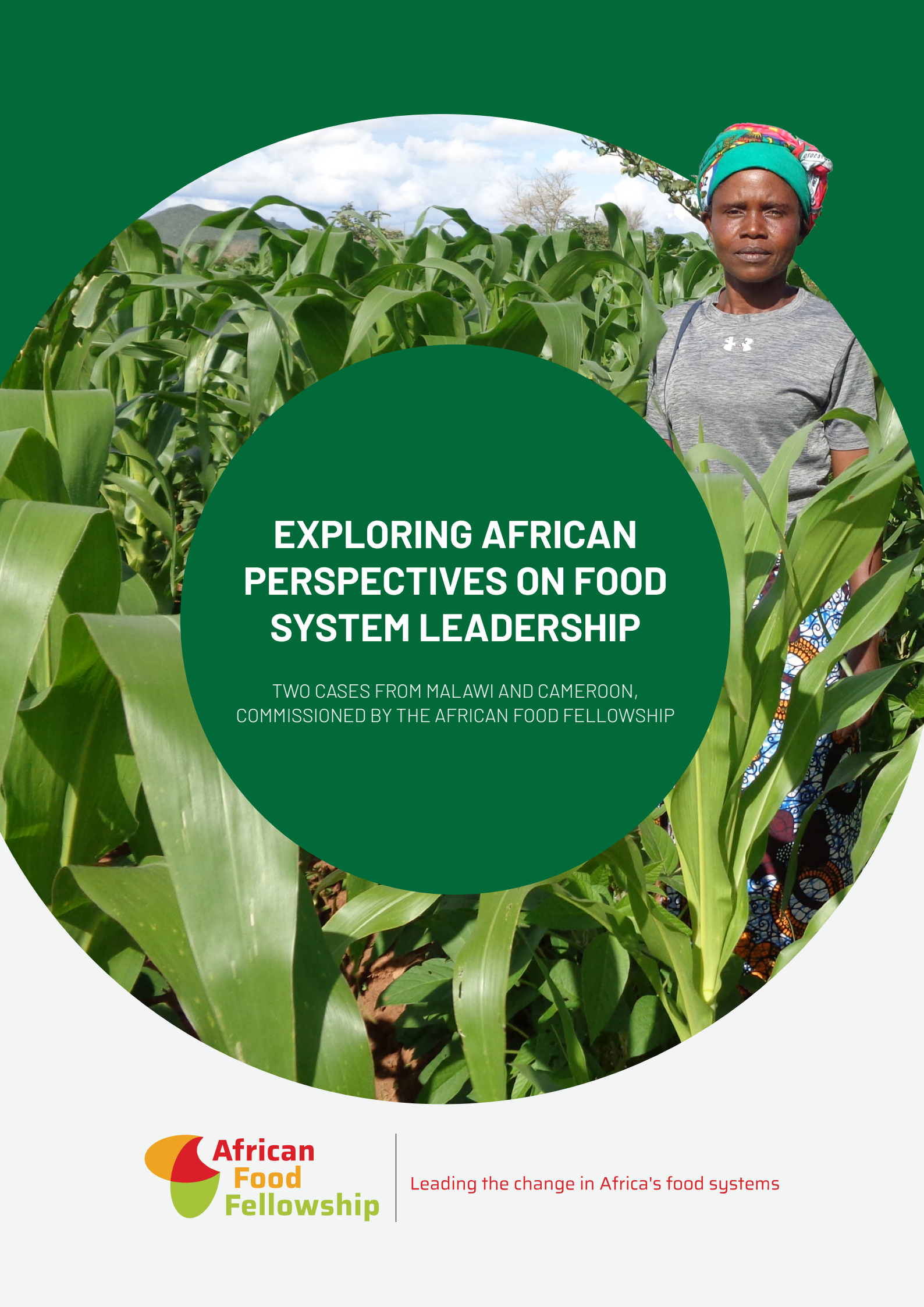




EXPLORING AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON FOOD SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

TWO CASES FROM MALAWI AND CAMEROON,
COMMISSIONED BY THE AFRICAN FOOD FELLOWSHIP

Exploring African perspectives on food system leadership

Two cases from Malawi and Cameroon,
commissioned by the African Food Fellowship

Date: May 2025

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About the African Food Fellowship

The African Food Fellowship (AFF) is coordinated by Wageningen University & Research and Wasafiri Consulting with support from IKEA Foundation. It aims to support the transformation of food systems across the African continent by 'building a radical movement of leaders in Africa'.



AFF case studies series

The African Food Fellowship (AFF) is engaging with partners to better understand African perspectives on leadership in food systems. This includes the forms that leadership networks and systems take across the continent, as well as how these can contribute to sustainable food systems change. The result is a series of case studies to explore food system leadership in Africa, demonstrating how collective food systems leadership is manifested and what outcomes are achieved. A particular focus of the case studies is:

The *characteristics* of leadership networks that facilitate shifts in policies, power dynamics and incentives toward food system transformation. The *capabilities* of leadership networks that support shifts towards sustainable and inclusive food systems.

This case study series presents two AFF-commissioned case studies exploring African perspectives on collective food system leadership in Malawi and Cameroon. The case studies in this report were developed by African Projects Solutions (APS) in partnership with the Small Five Knowledge Collective.

The two case studies demonstrate how collective food systems leadership is manifested and what outcomes can be (or have been) achieved. The first case study is on a southern African organisation – Soils, Food and Healthy Communities (SFHC) – based in Malawi and the second is on Concertation Nationale des Organisations Paysannes au Cameroun (CNOP-CAM, translated in English to the National Federation of Peasants' Organisations of Cameroon) based in central Africa.

Earlier case studies in this series include:

Towards sustainable land use:
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Food systems leadership: A
case study of Hydro Victoria
Fish Farm in Kenya (2023)



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List of Acronyms

AFF	African Food Fellowship
APS	African Project Solutions
CNOP-CAM	Concertation Nationale des Organisations Paysannes du Cameroun (National Confederation of Peasants' Organisations of Cameroon)
FRT	Farmer Research Team
PAFO	Pan-African Farmers' Organisation
PROPAC	Plateforme Régionale des Organisations Paysannes d'Afrique Centrale (Regional Platform of Central African Farmers' & Producers' Organisations)
SFHC	Soils, Food and Healthy Communities

Key terms and concepts

A summary of the key concepts from the literature review that informed the definitional lens through which the case studies are interpreted is provided below:

Characteristics of the leadership system: The structure of the system, including the composition of the leadership network, how it is arranged and how it works.

Capabilities: What a collective leadership system or network is able to do or achieve in terms of food systems transformation as a result of how it is arranged and functions.

Food secure/security: People always have access to adequate nutritious, safe food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Wageningen, 2025).

Food systems: “The web of actors, processes, and interactions involved in growing, processing, distributing, consuming, and disposing of foods, from the provision of inputs and farmer training, to product packaging and marketing, to waste recycling” taking into consideration the multiple interactions between actors, components and flows in the system, as well as the “. . . reinforcing and balancing feedback loops” (IPES-Food, 2015:3).

Food systems transformation: A radical change to the purpose, rules and power structures of a food system (Dengerink et al., 2022) or the final/highest order of change (Lawrence et al., 2015). Systems theory tells us that systems are, by their nature, constantly in flux. Transformation of a food system could therefore result from spontaneous changes or conscious efforts by human actors.

Food systems transitions: A gradual or incremental shift, largely facilitated through human agency, ultimately leading to transformation.

Systems leadership/leadership network: Systems leaders “catalyse collective leadership” (Senge, Hamilton & Kania, 2015:27) among many people working collaboratively from different levels and parts of a system, rather than within a single organisation, with the goal of effecting positive social change (Ghate, Lewis & Welbourn, 2013). Systems leadership also “crosses boundaries, both physical and virtual, existing simultaneously in multiple dimensions”, this means that the influence of the individuals extends beyond their normal (formal) roles and responsibilities (Ghate et al., 2013:6).

Collective leadership: No theory in the initial literature review seemed to speak specifically to the context of our case studies and will therefore be defined inductively based on the findings that emerge from the data collected and interpreted.

Distributed leadership: AFF has described distributed leadership as a feature of systems leadership, where leadership is socially distributed – i.e., it is not dependent on one person/positional authority but rather on the interaction of multiple leaders (Cucchi et al., 2023).

Executive Summary

Introduction

The African Food Fellowship (AFF) is a leadership initiative coordinated by Wageningen University & Research and Wasafiri Consulting, with support from the IKEA Foundation. It aims to catalyze transformation within African food systems by fostering leadership networks that are both inclusive and sustainable. This study examines two case studies—Soils, Food, and Healthy Communities (SFHC) in Malawi and the

Concertation Nationale des Organisations Paysannes au Cameroun (CNOP-CAM) in Cameroon—to explore how collective food system leadership is manifested in practice, what outcomes have been achieved, and what challenges persist. The study was implemented by African Projects Solutions (APS) in partnership with the Small Five Knowledge Collective.

CASE STUDY 1

Soils, Food, and Healthy Communities (SFHC), Malawi



SFHC, based in Ekwendeni, Mzimba district, northern Malawi, emerged as a response to worsening soil fertility, food insecurity, poor nutrition and gender disparities. The organization initially began with a small pilot project in 2000, a collaboration between a nutritionist at Ekwendeni hospital and a Canadian PhD student. The collaboration sought to address high rates of child malnutrition through a participatory, farmer-led approach that emphasized agroecology, gender equality, and community resilience. Over time, SFHC expanded its reach from seven villages to over 700, now working with more than 15,000 farming households.

The leadership structure of SFHC is characterized by a distributed, participatory model that engages multiple stakeholders at various levels. Governance includes a Board of Trustees, a General Assembly made up of farmers, Farmer Research Teams (FRTs), and field promoters who support the implementation of agroecological farming practices. Leadership is flexible, meaning that decision-making roles shift based on expertise, context, and need. Farmers themselves play a central role in shaping the organization's direction, ensuring that interventions align with local realities and priorities.

One of the most significant insights from SFHC is that collective leadership must be deeply embedded within local social structures. The organization has effectively navigated traditional hierarchies by working alongside village headmen and government extension services rather than in opposition to them. In doing so, SFHC has built credibility and trust, which has been instrumental in fostering buy-in from communities. The emphasis on participatory research ensures that farmers are not just passive beneficiaries but active knowledge producers who contribute to a growing body of agroecological practice.

Another defining characteristic of SFHC's approach is its commitment to long-term engagement. Rather than implementing short-term interventions, SFHC prioritizes gradual and sustained change. Over the years, it has expanded its focus beyond soil fertility and child malnutrition to encompass gender relations, climate resilience, and food sovereignty. By incorporating multiple dimensions of food system transformation, SFHC has created a model that is both holistic and adaptive and have received international recognition for its work.

A key characteristic of SFHC's collective leadership structure is its multi-layered, distributed approach,

as illustrated in Figure 1. Leadership shifts dynamically depending on context and expertise,

ensuring that decision-making remains inclusive and responsive to the needs of local farmers.

Figure 1: SFHC's Key Collective Leadership Characteristics



CASE STUDY 2 CNOP-CAM, Cameroon



CNOP-CAM was established in 2001 as a response to the structural adjustment programs of the 1990s, which led to the dismantling of state-supported agricultural cooperatives in Cameroon. The withdrawal of government assistance created a crisis for smallholder farmers, who faced rising production costs and increased market volatility. In response, a coalition of farmer organizations came together to form CNOP-CAM, a national federation that works to strengthen farmer-led advocacy, build local leadership capacity, and promote sustainable agricultural practices.

Unlike SFHC, which primarily operates at the community level, CNOP-CAM functions at multiple scales, engaging both grassroots farmer cooperatives and national policymakers. The organization has played a pivotal role in elevating the voices of smallholder farmers in policy discussions, ensuring that their needs are represented in national and regional decision-making processes. CNOP-CAM has also been instrumental in the establishment of PROPAC, a regional farmers' network, and has leveraged its affiliations with organizations such as the Pan-African Farmers' Organization (PAFO) to amplify its impact.

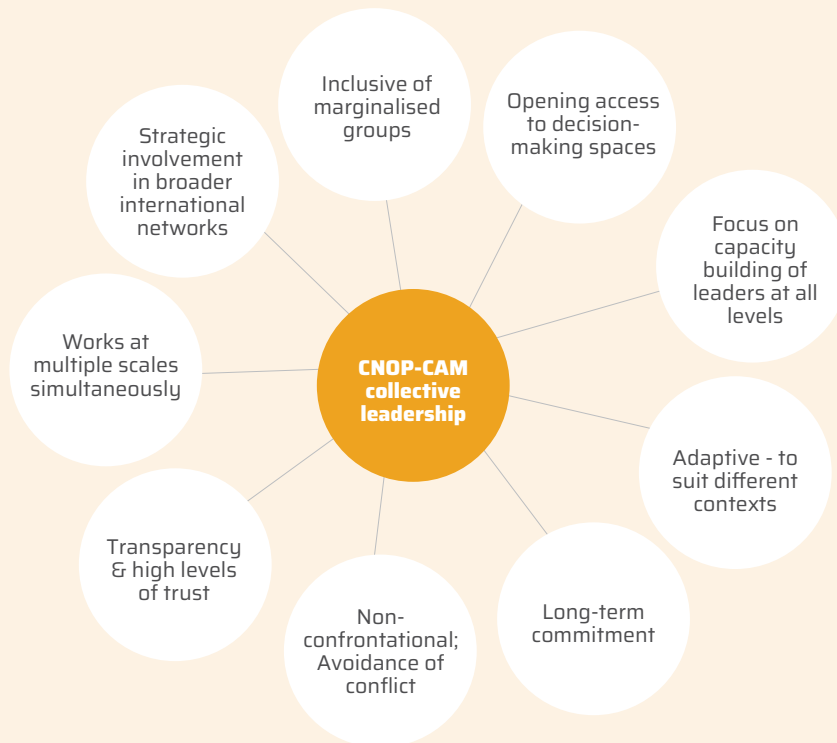
A core feature of CNOP-CAM's leadership model is its emphasis on inclusivity. Women and youth, historically marginalized in agricultural governance, have been actively integrated into leadership roles within the organization. By ensuring that decision-making structures reflect the diversity of its membership, CNOP-CAM has strengthened its legitimacy and created pathways for broader participation. This commitment to inclusivity extends beyond the organization itself; CNOP-CAM has worked with traditional leaders and government officials to advocate for improved land access for women and young farmers.

One of CNOP-CAM's most notable achievements has been its ability to build the advocacy capacity of farmer organizations. Through training and mentorship, the organization has empowered cooperatives to engage directly with policymakers, rather than relying solely on CNOP-CAM to represent their interests. This decentralized approach has increased the resilience of the broader farmer movement, ensuring that leadership is not

concentrated within a single entity but distributed across multiple stakeholders.

Despite these successes, CNOP-CAM faces significant challenges. Financial constraints remain a persistent issue, as the organization relies heavily on donor funding and membership fees to sustain its operations. Additionally, corruption within government structures poses barriers to policy influence, with some policymakers prioritizing the interests of agribusiness over those of smallholder farmers. CNOP-CAM has navigated these challenges by adopting a non-confrontational approach, emphasizing negotiation and collaboration rather than direct opposition. While this strategy has allowed the organization to maintain working relationships with government institutions, it also limits its ability to push for more radical policy changes. The characteristics of CNOP-CAM's collective leadership approach, which emphasizes inclusivity, advocacy, and long-term commitment, are outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2: CNOP-CAM's Key Collective Leadership Characteristics



Insights on Collective Food System Leadership

The experiences of SFHC and CNOP-CAM offer valuable insights into the dynamics of collective leadership within African food systems. One key lesson is that **effective leadership must be deeply rooted in community participation**. Both organizations prioritize farmer-led decision-making, ensuring that leadership structures are not imposed from above but emerge organically from within the communities they serve. This participatory approach not only enhances legitimacy but also fosters a sense of ownership and agency among stakeholders.

Another critical insight is the **importance of adaptability**. Both SFHC and CNOP-CAM have evolved over time, expanding their focus and refining their strategies in response to changing contexts. This flexibility has been crucial in navigating the complexities of food system transformation, allowing each organization to address emerging challenges while staying true to their core mission.

The case studies also highlight the **significance of multi-scalar engagement**. While SFHC primarily operates at the community level, CNOP-CAM engages across local, national, and regional scales. This contrast illustrates that collective leadership can take different

forms depending on the objectives and scope of an organization. For some initiatives, localized action is the most effective pathway to change, while others require engagement with broader policy frameworks to achieve systemic impact.

Finally, both cases underscore the **necessity of long-term commitment**. Transforming food systems is not a quick process; it requires sustained effort, relationship-building, and iterative learning. The successes of SFHC and CNOP-CAM are the result of years of dedication, rather than short-term projects. Their experiences demonstrate that collective leadership is not just about structure—it is about cultivating trust, fostering collaboration, and maintaining a shared vision over time.

Conclusion

The case studies of SFHC and CNOP-CAM illustrate that collective food system leadership in Africa is dynamic, context-specific, and deeply embedded in local realities. While their approaches differ, both organizations have demonstrated the power of participatory, inclusive, and adaptive leadership in driving food system transformation. As Africa continues to grapple with food security and sustainability challenges, these models offer valuable lessons for other initiatives seeking to build resilient and equitable food systems.

1. Introduction

A substantial portion of African household food security is ensured by production on small-scale family farms. The global shift to corporate conventional farming and subsequently Big Food and supermarketisation have influenced government agriculture strategies and subsequently farmer support programmes in Africa.



In Malawi and Cameroon, largely agrarian societies, this influence from external actors, oriented towards Green Revolution technologies, has led to farmer support primarily being provided in the form of subsidies for conventional inputs, in particular synthetic fertiliser and hybrid maize seed. This has resulted in a loss of productive and fertile land through soil degradation, a reduction of nutritious diverse diets, and loss of generational/indigenous knowledge related to growing diverse local and seasonal crops, seed saving practices and protection of soil and biodiversity.

There is a need to (re)orientate agricultural production, particularly in agrarian societies, towards climate-resilient agroecological practices that are environmentally restorative and regenerative. This entails building resilience and sovereignty at community, household and individual levels so that individuals and communities can put in place and hold processes, practices and systems that serve them, shifting from current hierarchical, and often discriminatory, power structures; some regard this shift as decolonising the food system (Moyo, 2023). Resilient and food sovereign communities are ultimately more self-reliant, inclusive, gender sensitive and are making decisions appropriate for their context.

AFF notes in their call for case study proposals that leaders working in different roles, sectors and contexts within Africa's food systems are critical in shaping the agendas, market dynamics and wider contexts for how food systems currently operate and possible transition pathways. It is therefore important to grapple with how food system transformation can and should happen on the continent, who will lead this process and what forms it could take. Understanding this will provide insights into ways that leaders and collective leadership systems are working towards sustainable food systems transformation and how this can be effectively and meaningfully supported.



To better understand collective leadership and how this can contribute to food systems transformation, the APS-Small Five consortium developed two case studies for the AFF. Both case studies explored how collective food systems leadership is manifested, the contribution these collective leadership systems have made (and can make) to food systems transformation and what outcomes have been (and can be) achieved.

The case studies specifically focus on:



- The characteristics of leadership networks that facilitate shifts in policies, power dynamics and incentives toward food system transformation.
- The capabilities of leadership networks that support shifts towards sustainable and inclusive food systems.

The first case study is on a southern African organisation – Soils, Food and Healthy Communities (SFHC) – based in Malawi and the second is on *Concertation Nationale des Organisations Paysannes au Cameroun* (CNOP-CAM, translated in English to the National Federation of Peasants' Organisations of Cameroon) based in central Africa.

Each case study outlines the characteristics and capabilities of the collective leadership system being studied, exploring how collective leadership is defined; interpretations of food systems and food systems transformation in this context; the scale at which the collective leadership system functions; if transformation has occurred and how it came about – was it incremental (transition) or sudden, and lastly challenges and barriers to food systems transformation.

2. Food systems leadership

It is clear that transforming the food system will require solving complex challenges that emerge from multiple, intersecting spaces, such as culture, worldviews, values and historical dynamics. While each context has its own historical influences and challenges, in Africa, this includes the impacts of colonisation, as well as globalisation and neo-liberal economics and the impact on food systems.

Africa thus requires transformative leadership that must de-emphasise Eurocentric leadership concepts in favour

of African perspectives and de-colonise the food system (Moyo, 2023). This type of leadership has to navigate entrenched norms (especially gender relations) and power dynamics (around local governance structures, for example) and also generate a sense of ownership of the food system among a broad range of stakeholders.

Leaders who work beyond their traditional organisational roles will be key to bring about the large-scale positive change required (Senge, Hamilton & Kania, 2015; Ghate, Lewis & Welbourn, 2013). Leadership needs to not only be agile, adaptive, and resourceful, but also distributed throughout a food system. Distributed leadership enables the building of agency in broader affected stakeholders to support them in shifting their local context, reclaiming their connection to food and farming systems, and reorienting 'ownership' of their food system towards farmers and consumers. The case studies that follow provide more insight into how food systems leadership in Africa is manifested in practice.



3. Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to gather data for these case studies. This consisted of interviews and focus group discussions to gather primary data, which was then supplemented with secondary data through a review of available literature.



Stakeholders from multiple levels of the two networks were engaged to ensure a holistic perspective and well-rounded understanding of the network and leadership aspects. An iterative, reflexive learning approach to data collection was applied, with the data collected from each interview being used to refine the interview and focus group discussion questions and to build on the information gathered.

For the SFHC case study, members of its collective leadership network as well as those on the periphery of the network were interviewed. The interviews and focus groups aimed to target an equal number of women and men in an attempt to gain a holistic, balanced perspective of the leadership system. There were 13 interviews conducted with the founders and management of SFHC, project coordinators, field staff, Farmer Research Team (FRT) members, village heads and government extension officers who have worked with SFHC; and 4 focus group discussions were held with promoters (SFHC field staff), FRT members and farmers.

The CNOP-CAM data collection process consisted of interviews with 6 key informants, 2 of whom

were interviewed several times, and 5 focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted with members of the *Plateforme Régionale des Organisations Paysannes d'Afrique Centrale* (Regional Platform of Central African Farmers' & Producers' Organisations) (PROPAC) secretariat, leaders from CNOP-CAM's secretariat and regional (provincial) leaders from the North-West and Adamoua regions. Focus group discussions were conducted with groups of farmers and leaders of two farming cooperatives in the Central and Western regions (provinces). A French-speaking researcher assisted with the online interviews and the focus groups were conducted by a French-speaking, in-country research assistant.

The data was analysed using elements of grounded theory and thematic analysis. As data was collected, it was reviewed and a rough analysis conducted to draw out emerging themes and to refine questions for the next round of data collection. Findings were then verified with research participants, either through focus groups, sharing written findings via email or on virtual calls.

4. Case study 1: SFHC, Ekwendeni, Malawi

4.1 Introduction

This case study explores the collective leadership approach in place at SFHC located in Ekwendeni, Mzimba district in northern Malawi. SFHC “promotes agroecological farming practices to help communities increase soil fertility, sustain nutritious and diverse diets, encourage democratic leadership and gender equity, and build resilience against climate change” (SFHC, 2025:1). It is a non-profit organisation and works with a range of stakeholders, including farmers, government and academia, to strengthen farmer networks, improve agroecological production and food security, promote gender inclusivity and regenerate the local landscape. It currently works in 703 villages with more than 15,000 farmers (households).

Through a literature review, interviews and focus group discussions (see Appendix 1 for an overview of primary

data collection), the case study identifies an innovative and collective leadership set-up that has had significant success in transforming the local food system within its project boundaries. Key elements include distributed leadership structures; working with context and ‘what is’; building long-term capacity for individual, team and organisational leadership; and finding creative ways to solve adaptive challenges.

SFHC’s leadership arrangement includes the following attributes: engages with a wide diversity of stakeholders in a relational way over long periods of time; elevates the voices of those not within their direct sphere of operations into their governance structures; works creatively with power dynamics and sensitive issues, such as gender; and has systematically and systemically altered the food system in their location.



SFHC “promotes agroecological farming practices to help communities increase soil fertility, sustain nutritious and diverse diets, encourage democratic leadership and gender equity, and build resilience against climate change” (SFHC, 2025:1)

It is a non-profit organisation and works with a range of stakeholders, including farmers, government and academia, to strengthen farmer networks, improve agroecological production and food security, promote gender inclusivity and regenerate the local landscape. It currently works in 703 villages with more than 15,000 farmers.

4.2 Setting the scene: Malawi

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world with 71% of the population living in extreme poverty and characterised by high levels of food insecurity (World Bank, 2025). There are also high levels of unemployment and a steadily growing population, with 51% of the population under 18 years of age as of 2018. Food insecurity and malnutrition are significant challenges in Malawi.

The 2020 Food and Nutrition Strategy notes that all ages, sexes and income groups are affected by food and nutritional insecurity, and that it is costing the country dearly (National Planning Commission, 2020). The Malawian government estimated that the costs associated just with child undernutrition in the country were as high as 10.3% of the gross domestic product in 2012 – the equivalent of US\$597 million (Government of Malawi, 2012).

Malawian food systems centre around domestic agricultural production; the Government of Malawi (2021:1) notes that:



The food systems in Malawi fulfil the purposes for food security, nutritional and health, environmental sustainability, social economy, and territorial balance. However, about 90% of the food supply in the country comes directly from agriculture and most of Malawi's household food availability is generally determined by own production.

Smallholder farmers produce 80% of the food consumed in the country (World Bank, 2019) and a significant proportion of the population rely on agriculture, mostly rain-fed, for their food security and livelihoods (World Bank, 2019).

High levels of poverty and food insecurity, environmental degradation and the significant reliance on rain-fed agricultural production makes the Malawian population highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change (World Bank, 2024). In recent years, there have been more frequent cyclones, notably Cyclone Idai, and extreme weather events (such as the current drought in some parts and floods in other parts of the country) that have impacted the country as a result of the El Nino phenomenon. These events have resulted in increased

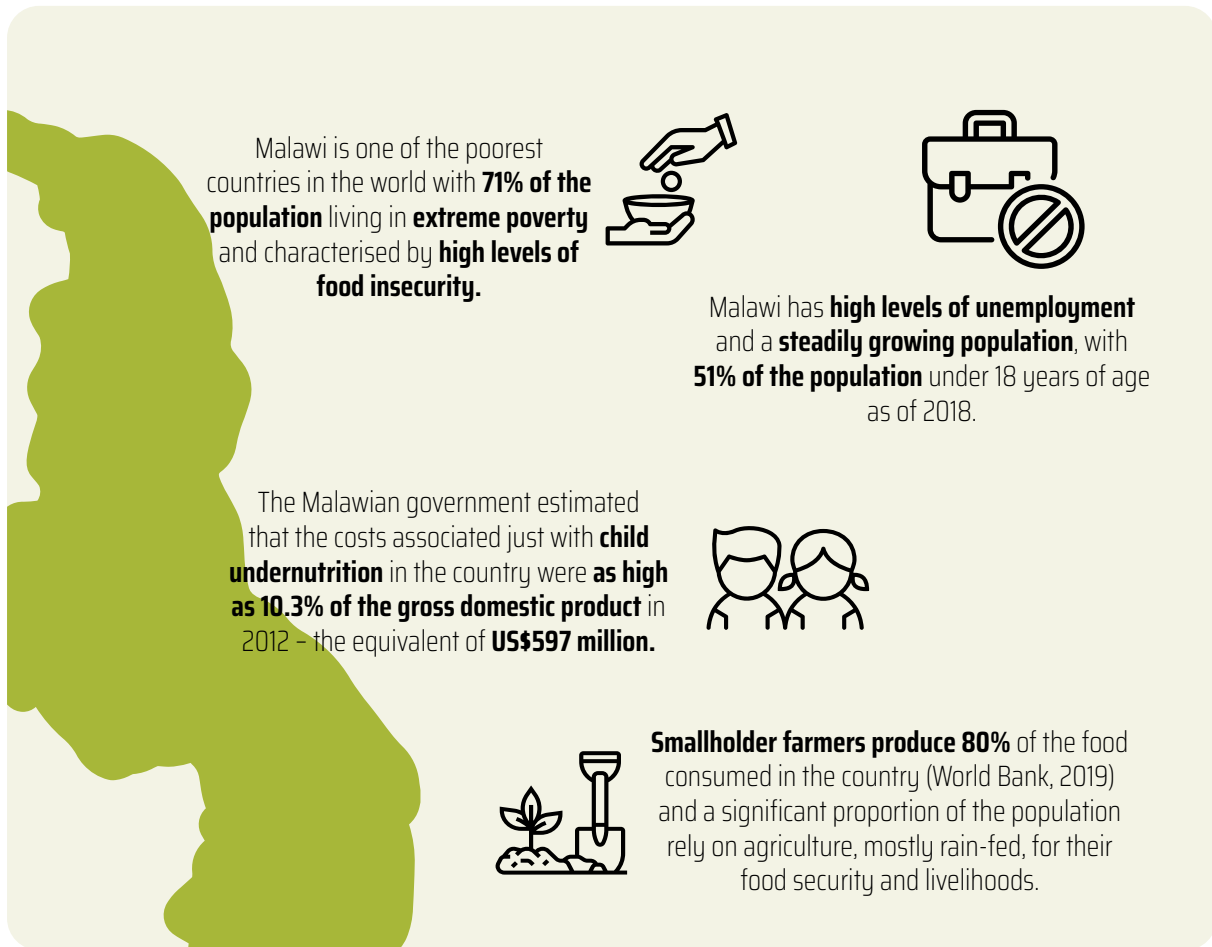
food prices, food and water shortages, a decline in agricultural production, displacement of people and increased health risks (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2024).

Gender is a critical issue in the traditionally patriarchal communities of Malawi; women are limited in terms of their decision-making agency in the household, and men are generally in charge of finances and allocation of household income, which in many cases may not be in the interests of the household. There are deeply entrenched gender inequalities in country as a whole; women mostly engage in low-income activities and unpaid care and tend to have limited access to resources and assets (Lovell, 2021). Less than 42% of gender-related indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals are being met in Malawi (Giovetti, 2021).

Noting the complex set of challenges faced within Malawi's food systems and the central role played by agriculture, re-orienting the food system(s) requires a creative, multi-level approach. In their report on sustainable food systems in Malawi, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (2022) provides a number of recommendations necessary for transforming the food system including improving dietary diversity and economic productivity of small-scale food producers, fostering climate resilience, increasing focus on food loss and waste management, and greater spending on on-farm interventions particularly those that are environmentally sustainable. The SFHC case study demonstrates a local level approach to collective leadership that addresses all of the above recommendations as well as focusing on gender equality, resulting in significant shifts in the system in terms of gender, nutrition and food security, livelihoods, social dynamics, environmental preservation and health.

4.3 Formation of the SFHC collective leadership structure

The origins of SFHC lie in a 1997 meeting between Esther Lupafya, then Director of Maternal and Child Nutrition at Ekwendeni hospital in northern Malawi and Rachel Bezner-Kerr, visiting Canadian graduate student undertaking PhD research on liquid manure and child malnutrition. Both women were keen to tackle the high levels of child malnutrition in the area that had not responded maternal and child health interventions at Ekwendeni hospital.



They subsequently worked together to interview households that had admitted children to hospital because of severe malnutrition and found several underlying causes. These were:

- Heavy reliance of farmer households on one crop (maize).
- Low levels of dietary diversity.
- High levels of food insecurity and poor nutrition
- Infertile soils
- Reliance on synthetic fertilizers which many smallholder farmers could not afford.
- High levels of gender inequality.

The broader context of poor infrastructure such as roads, intermittent electricity supply and entrenched multidimensional and intergenerational poverty adds further complexity to the challenges facing the food system.

Rachel and Esther started working together in a more formalised way in 2000 when SFHC, Rachel and Ekwendeni hospital ran a pilot project tackling issues of children malnutrition and household food security. The project targeted seven villages characterised by severe child malnutrition; leadership in these villages was keen to support the project. Drawing on their different skills and expertise they secured a grant from International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Canada, to run this pilot project, thus initiating SFHC's work and catalysing the formation of its collective leadership system. See Appendix 2 for a full timeline.

4.3.1 The pilot intervention and early years (2000-2004)

Thirty farmers were trained in a range of agricultural practices, including crop rotation, intercropping and inclusion of legumes by Rachel, Esther and others from the nutrition department at Ekwendeni hospital.

The farmers were then given a choice about which cereals and legumes to trial and which of the different practices to implement. The farmers were also involved in choosing indicators against which to assess progress and for which they would keep records; for example, greenness of the leaves and size of the crops (size of stems and cobs, fullness of legume pods).

This was the start of the Farmer Research Teams (FRT) that remain a key tenet of SFHC's approach today. FRT members are volunteer farmers based in each village in which SFHC works. They are selected by their local community, at least one man and one woman per village. They form a critical part of SFHC's collective leadership structure showcasing good practices and leading by example, providing agroecological extension services, coordinating local events, liaising with village heads, and conducting ongoing research and experimentation on behalf of SFHC.

By 2002, in the midst of a food and fertiliser shortage in Malawi, villages participating in the pilot saw improved crop outputs and signs of increased soil fertility. This inspired interest from other villages to join the initiative, expanding the project scope from 7 villages and 30 households to approximately 100 villages and over 450 households.

Data points for the project extended beyond agronomic indicators to nutritional ones, including height-for-weight measures of more than 1 000 children under five years of age over a three-year period. In the first year SFHC noted that there was not a significant impact on childhood nutrition. However, in the second year as soils improved and crop outputs increased the project began to see a noticeable shift. To grow the impact of the project SFHC realized it was necessary to broaden their focus.

As a result, they extended their scope to improve household knowledge of nutrition and to address gender inequality through the following levers:



Agriculture and nutrition discussion groups, including men and women of childbearing age, as well as grandmothers and grandfathers.



Cooking demonstrations ('recipe days') including both women and men (i.e., to learn how to prepare the new crops that had been introduced in the agronomic programme and to sensitise people to new ways to consider gender norms).



Creative activities to engage the communities, such as "gender transformative learning through theatre performances" (Kansanga et al., 2021:10).



Following the introduction of these activities, SFHC started to see a gradual reduction in child malnutrition levels for those households that were implementing the agricultural interventions and participating in the cooking demonstrations, theatre workshops and discussion groups. Over time, SFHC has continued to work in more villages, and broadened the scope of their interventions as feedback from the community indicated further areas requiring support and knowledge sharing. For example, access to good seed varieties was identified as a key issue and, in response, SFHC helped to set up two seed banks and provide training on seed multiplication and storage. They also focused on training in post-harvest management, to ensure that *“during dry season they have food”*. Speaking with the secretariat team, all of them emphasised that they have started working at the landscape-level. This is due to the growing understanding that a holistic approach to tackling the range of challenges faced by local communities across multiple systems – food, water, health, environment, etc. – is necessary to effectively address the issues and transform the food system. One interviewee explained that their overall goal is *“healthy resilient communities”*, and that a goal this broad requires work at many different levels or entry points.

4.3.2 Formation of a formal non-profit organisation

As the scope of the work broadened, it became difficult to continue to work through the hospital. SFHC was thus formalised as a non-profit organisation (registered in 2017), with a Board of Trustees and General Assembly composed of farmers who had been involved since the initial pilot project. Today, SFHC works with a range of stakeholders including promoters (field staff), FRTs, traditional authorities, government and local

and international research/academic institutions to strengthen farmer networks. It conducts ongoing contextually relevant research to enhance their farmer support processes, and work to embed and upscale agroecological production, improve processing and market capacity, enhance nutrition, promote gender inclusivity and mitigate climate change.

4.4 SFHC’s collective leadership arrangement

SFHC’s collective leadership arrangement is a distributed leadership system. This is when leadership is stretched across formal and informal leaders (Harris et al., 2022) and does not rest with one person (Spillane et al., 2001).

SFHC has a multi-layered leadership arrangement with leaders at different levels located within the organisation, staff and volunteers, and outside of the organisation, farmers, village headmen and academic researchers. In addition, it consists of bodies, e.g., General Assembly and of individuals. Leadership is fluid and shifts depending on context – in other words, who is a leader and when varies dependent on area of expertise, context and need. Therefore, SFHC’s leadership arrangement is premised on the idea that everyone involved in their work is a leader or has a leadership role to play in some context and that this shifts and changes.

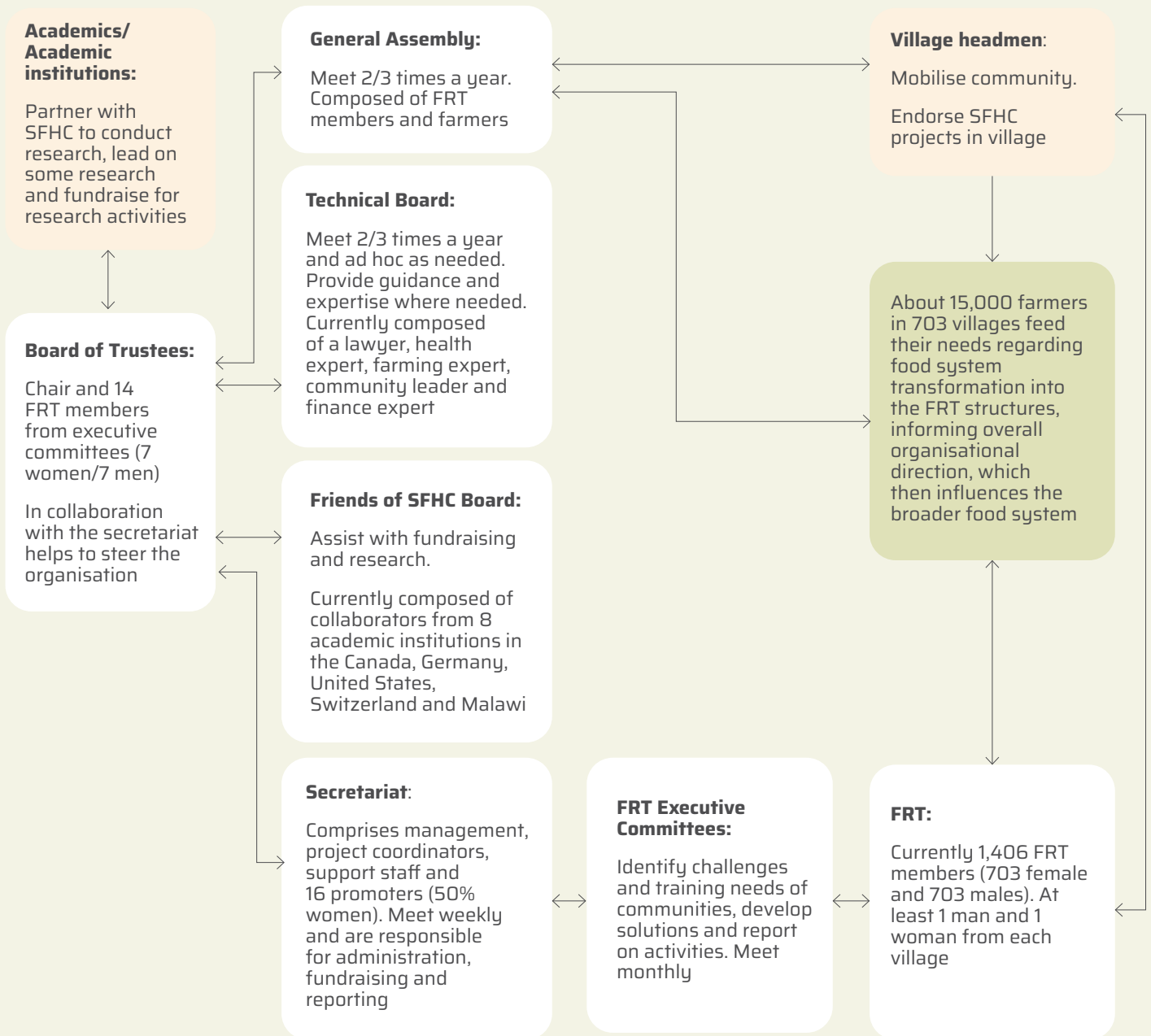
SFHC’s governance structures provide clear roles and responsibilities thus overcoming the challenges commonly faced in distributed leadership arrangements. Documented in the table below are key role players in SFHC’s collective leadership arrangement as of end-2024.

Table 1 : Role players in SFHC’s collective leadership arrangement

ROLE PLAYERS IN SFHC	
Role player	When they are a leader
SFHC management team	• Fundraise: Ensure funds are available to maintain the work of SFHC • Technical support: Provide expertise in certain contexts • Proposal and report writing • Financial management • Promote SFHC’s work to broader networks • Maintain academic/research institution and donor relationships • Maintain the structures and functions of SFHC

ROLE PLAYERS IN SFHC	
Role player	When they are a leader
	• Lead by example/model practices • Provide training • Monitoring and evaluation
Promoters	• Lead by example • Provide expertise and extension support in certain areas • Guide and support FRTs in their work when needed • Coordinate events including monthly farmer meetings • Provide training • Liaise with traditional authorities and other government structures • Provide training to farmers and other groups
FRTs (Volunteers)	• Lead by example • Offer local extension and expertise • Identify and highlight issues faced within the community – which guides SFHCs work and proposal development • Coordinate events • Liaise with traditional authorities and other government structures
Rachel Bezner Kerr	• Write proposals • Fundraise • Publish research advocating for food systems change • Promote SFHC's work
ROLE PLAYERS BEYOND SFHC	
Fellow farmers	• Model good practices • Share knowledge/expertise with others in their community • Form part of General Assembly
Village headmen	
Academics (local and international)	• Develop specific research-related proposals or parts of proposals • Coordinate research efforts/activities (in collaboration with SFHC) • Publish research

Figure 1 illustrates SFHC's governance structure, including the levels at which key role players and bodies interact and influence.

FIGURE 1 SFHC governance structure

4.4.1 Characteristics of SFHC's collective leadership

Figure 2 outlines the main characteristics of SFHC's collective leadership arrangement, which are discussed in the sections that follow.

FIGURE 2 SFHC's key collective leadership characteristics

Leadership qualities

For a person to be a good leader and be part of the collective, a number of important qualities were identified, significantly being humble, good listening skills and valuing others' perspectives. The other **leadership qualities** identified as important in the SFHC context (most explicitly described when referred to the FRT selection process) are dedication to farming, leading by example, relatable and able to engage, build trust and respect. Approachable, honest, respectable, good communicators, committed and the ability to play a follower role, i.e., be adaptable and flexible.

Distributed leadership

The key leadership arrangement is based on different people taking on a leadership role in different contexts; for example, SFHC management leads on securing resources to ensure the ongoing work can continue, but promoters lead in-field activities in certain cases, in particular, in supporting FRTs and farmers. FRTs provide support and guidance in their villages and coordinate local events for cross-learning and exchange.

Finally, fellow/follower farmers guide the direction of the organisation, the work it does and, therefore, which funding proposals are developed. This is done through feedback from FRTs to promoters, the General Assembly and the Board of Trustees. The ability to transition from leader to follower, dependent on the context, requires those in the role to be flexible and adaptable.

Every person interviewed from the SFHC Secretariat emphasised that SFHC is **'farmer-led'**. Indeed, farmers make up most of the Board and the General Assembly, and SFHC holds farmers and communities at the heart of all that the organisation does. The projects that it initiates, including the trialling of potential solutions, are determined through consultations with the farmers and communities on the problems on which they want to focus. One of the SFHC Secretariat team explained that if an outside organisation approaches them to participate in a project, *"before we say yes we have to invite the General Assembly, we discuss, because at the end of the day it is not us who is going to implement, it is going to be them and so they should first say 'yes' before we proceed."*

Farmers and farming communities, beyond the bounds of the SFHC leadership and organisation, are thus key decision makers, providing the executive leadership with clear direction for the organisation – this is, in practice, collective leadership. The governance model is designed to bring in the voices and needs of a network that spans hundreds of villages and thousands of farming households to influence activities undertaken by SFHC at the landscape level.

Everyone is a leader and a teacher. Everyone involved with SFHC is expected to **lead by example**, in particular all promoters and FRTs have to be farmers, and their farms are used as examples to other farmers. Anyone engaged and working with SFHC is expected to pass on knowledge and information to others. This is linked to one of the challenges mentioned by some of the interviewees, that of attracting the *"right kind of people"* when they need to recruit into the secretariat.

There is a concerted effort to avoid a hierarchical structure and create a **level playing field** between different stakeholders where all members of the system have influence. This is demonstrated by the transitional nature of leaders in this case. It is not only SFHC management or board members that are leaders, nor do they remain leaders all the time. Instead, the person to take up a leadership role is determined by who is best equipped to lead in a particular circumstance. This requires strong trust and respect amongst the members of the collective leadership system, as well as an understanding that all stakeholders play a leading and teaching role in some situations and a following/learning role in others.

A representative of the SFHC Secretariat stated that *"...we try as much as possible to work as equals, that is the goal, even dress is important... we laugh together, we'll eat together, we'll do things together"*.

Another member explained that, when they go *"into the community then the leaders are the promoters, then SFHC is listening, and we are followers"*. Leadership and expertise are acknowledged and honoured in all spheres of the network.

From the farmer-led approach to the formal management and board of SFHC, including women who were previously marginalised, all forms of knowledge and experience have a place in the system.

Shared vision

It is understood by all stakeholders in SFHC's network that the organisation is farmer-led and that the goal of the work is to create healthy soils, healthy food and healthy communities. While not all members of the collective leadership system talk in terms of the food system, there is this shared vision to improve food production and food security, protect the environment and combat climate change. Less explicit but underpinning all of SFHC's work is the **addressing of gender inequality**.

Context responsive

SFHC has navigated cultural beliefs and local power structures to negotiate benefits from within the system and to develop new ways of 'being' for community members. This includes promoting current, renewed (lost practices) and new beneficial ways of 'doing' that regenerate the natural environment.

Imperative to identifying these practices and fostering local buy-in is **respecting and valuing indigenous knowledge and practices**, a key part of SFHC's approach. SFHC understands and acknowledges that a lot of the knowledge and skills needed to create a shift in the food system are held within the local communities with whom they work. In addition, these communities must lead the transformation process. They always aim to learn from these communities and integrate this knowledge into their activities (researching it when necessary). Understanding and building on local knowledge and practices is therefore the starting point. By taking these as the starting point and discussing these in dialogue with the communities, SFHC has been able to understand the basis of these beliefs and work to shift those beliefs that were unhelpful.

One interviewee told us that SFHC knew that they could not "tell" people what to do or *"go against what they have always been doing but rather had conversations – and had constructive conversations – presenting alternative ways of doing things in practice"*. A good example is Bambara nuts, which are traditionally only grown by households that have lost a child. Now in the areas where SFHC works almost everyone is growing Bambara nuts, because the crop is nutritionally rich and good for the soil. SFHC has used creative approaches such as music, dance and participatory theatre to discuss and reflect on beliefs and practices that are beneficial or unhelpful.

SFHC **understands how to navigate (and respect) formal structures**. In Malawi, traditional leadership structures coexist with the structures of the national democratic government. Malawian 'governance' structures are typically hierarchical from formal government structures to community governance led by traditional chiefs to family structures led by men as key decision makers. SFHC has learnt to navigate, communicate and work across these different structures and governance systems, with some of them forming part of the collective leadership structure. An interviewee noted that SFHC *"participates in every single government meeting relevant to the area. . . [it is] important to maintain relationships with local government and adhere to policies and protocols [to] ensure support"*.

There is, however, also recognition of the challenges of working with the government, especially because SFHC wants to work at a landscape level where they need to work with a *"multitude of stakeholders and get them to work together"* according to a representative of the SFHC secretariat; a difficult task when government officials *"require money to attend, to be present"* at any meeting.

At the community level, an interviewee noted that:



The communities are divided into existing structures that are communally recognized and respected. You'll find in the communities there are several committees that are selected and leadership in place. SFHC does not come in to destroy existing structures and leadership arrangements but rather work with them e.g., you have a forest committee and in it is a village . . . and suggest they could bring in an additional person in the community who is an expert in compost making and could build that into the discussions and could add a person for recipe sharing around food preparation so the information is infiltrating.

When it comes to aspects of traditional leadership, SFHC does not always intervene directly. For example, while they have challenged gender norms within and between households, they have not tried to challenge the village headmen, who still have the authority to allocate land holding rights and whose “patriarchal authority is not the subject of debate or discussion” (Patel, Bezner Kerr, Shumba & Dakishoni, 2010:37). SFHC seems to take a more indirect approach; including the village headman in the villages where they work as much as possible in their processes. Some of the FRT members are village headmen and in other villages where this is not the case, the FRTs maintain strong relationships with the village headmen who effectively become part of the collective leadership structure. They play a leadership role when it comes to mobilising members of the community in relation to SFHC’s activities. Village headmen have the power to make local by-laws related to their local villages, which can contribute to SFHC’s efforts to transform the local food system. One headman interviewed spoke about how he has passed certain bylaws to “*protect agroecological practices*” and also mobilised his village to take “*collective action*” for forest regeneration.

Long-term, consistent and relational engagements

The process of working with people and groups, drawing on and enhancing local knowledge, and **building skills and relationships over a long period** of time has been integral to SFHC’s work. SFHC acknowledges that **change takes time and is incremental and evolutionary, based on lessons learned**, i.e., they deploy an **iterative, evidence-based** approach. SFHC’s work and achievements have taken place over 24 years. One of the FRT members said, “*They are solidly based in the community. Other organisations come and go but SFHC is always here. The other organisations only come to complement what SFHC is already teaching us.*” There is a significant focus on establishing and maintaining relationships that are built on respect and trust and a commitment to working in the long-term to bring about a transformed food system.

4.4.2 Cross-cutting elements

There are cross-cutting elements in this leadership arrangement, including an emphasis on evidence-based interventions and long-term capacity building.

- **Strategic, evidence-based interventions:** SFHC’s work is guided by farmers, thus farmers determine their own needs as a basis for interventions. In turn, all research and donor funding is directed towards fulfilling those needs. Interventions are mostly undertaken through participatory research that in itself fosters learning through an iterative approach that can also respond to emerging information and needs. The close working relationship with an academic since inception has meant SFHC has built formal data collection and record keeping into their structures since inception. The published evidence has enabled SFHC to validate their approach to outsiders and leverage further support/funding.
- **Long-term capacity building:** The FRTs, who are also farmers, have been heavily supported in building capacity such as facilitation skills, running meetings and gatherings etc. The FRT process is a long journey – they are selected by the local community, then go through a rigorous training/capacity building programme with the SFHC team where they learn how to manage group dynamics, among other skills. The promoters are there to support, but FRTs will hold and facilitate processes. And because the FRTs have been through training they are able to use the Farming for Change manual, which they have co-created, pre-tested and validated themselves, and are therefore comfortable to use. This whole process gives them confidence to act in their role as leaders.

4.5 SFHC's collective leadership capabilities

The approach and methods used by SFHC in the first five years continue to inform their work in ensuring that their approach is evidence-based, iterative, led and informed by context, and inclusive both in terms of addressing inequality and the way that interventions are designed, i.e., farmers or households are included and integral to the design process.

A collective leadership arrangement that is dynamic and distributed, with different role players at different levels, taking a leading role in different contexts has allowed for SFHC to ensure that the most appropriate person/people is/are leading in a given situation. In particular they are able to have strong leaders of both genders who understand and respect the local community, social systems and beliefs, are able to effectively navigate these local systems and dynamics in an adept and considered way. This has resulted in local communities being heard and included, fostering buy-in and, in turn, active involvement in the food system transformation

process. This leadership arrangement has contributed significantly to SFHC's progress in terms of changing the local food system.

This transformation is visible through measurable changes, including positive shifts in dietary and nutrition patterns, improved soil fertility, enhanced crop production and better yields, greater gender inclusion and the development of overall stronger and more resilient communities.

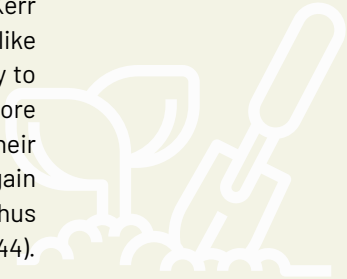
SFHC's leadership has resulted in tangible positive changes in the food system, placing it clearly on a transition pathway to a more sustainable system. It has taken time (24 years) and will take even longer to achieve a full transformation, but SFHC's approach ensures that ownership of the transitioning and ultimately the transformed system will rest with users of the food system – farmers and consumers. The sections detail SFHC's key achievements in this regard.

A collective leadership arrangement that is dynamic and distributed, with different role players at different levels, taking a leading role in different contexts has allowed for SFHC to ensure that the most appropriate person/people is/are leading in a given situation



4.5.1 Agriculture, environmental protection and regeneration

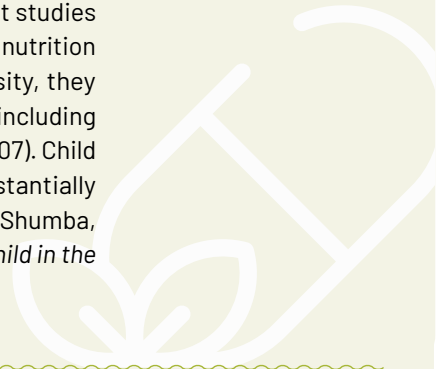
Farmers have improved soil fertility, resulting in better water retention, and improved crop yields with a more diverse array of crops planted. This is largely a result of the training provided in agroecological farming practices but also reforestation interventions. Various studies have shown that participating farmers have increased their use of intercropping, legume diversification and soil amendments of compost, manure and crop residues (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019; Madsen et al., 2021). SFHC is currently trialling interventions like fuel-efficient stoves that lessen the amount of deforestation necessary to generate fuel for cooking. A study of farmers who joined the programme more recently found that most did not indicate a desire for higher yields as their main motivation for participating, rather they expressed a need to “regain control over their inputs, such as seed, fertiliser, land and labour, and thus greater control over how they allocated their harvest” (Madsen et al., 2021:944).



4.5.2 Health, nutrition and food security

Nutrition and food security were the impetus at the start of SFHC and improvements are clear. Several of our interviewees spoke about increased crop diversification and improved yields, one FRT member says most farmers are growing at least five different crops, “such as maize, groundnut, soybean, millet, pigeon pea and beans”, and another FRT member says her community can now meet “the six food groups”.

As the project has grown and spread into new villages, more recent studies show that the agroecological practices continue to benefit food and nutrition security (Madsen, 2021). For participants with higher crop diversity, they have “better household food security and diet diversity for women, including higher consumption of Vitamin A rich foods” (Owoputi et al., 2022:407). Child growth rates (both height-for-age and weight-for-age) were substantially improved over a six-year period (2002-2007) (Bezner Kerr, Berti & Shumba, 2010). One interviewee claims that now there is “no malnourished child in the whole catchment area”.



4.5.3 Gender and social relations

There have been improved gender relations in many households, particularly in terms of: i) shared decision making around budgeting, education of children, use of agricultural produce and seed saving; ii) food preparation – men are more involved and aware of importance of dietary diversity; iii) shared responsibilities – particularly in the agricultural setting, with men and women now working together where historically certain tasks would have been the responsibility of only one or the other.



However, “more deep-rooted and difficult issues such as domestic violence, and structurally embedded aspects such as ownership of land” have been more difficult to change (Bezner Kerr et al., 2016:256). At least two studies of the farmers involved in the project over the years have shown stronger “social practices of reciprocity and trust” (Madsen et al., 2021:945) and improved “social capital” (Kansanga et al., 2019:10) in the communities. Because agroecology is such a ‘knowledge-intensive’ approach, the increased knowledge sharing and farmer experimentation also serve to build the resilience of the community (Bezner Kerr et al., 2018).

4.5.4 Climate change adaptation

The households that work with SFHC have demonstrated improved resilience and are better able to manage climate disasters. In one study, “Farmer observations about their diets and farming practices suggested that crop diversification was a key strategy for them to adapt to climate change as well as improve diets.” (Bezner-Kerr et al., 2019:119). One of our interviewees describes the benefits, *“this year, we were hard hit by drought, but most of the farmers who applied agroecology practices, their crops did well as compared to those who applied chemical fertilisers”*.



4.5.5 Enhanced farmer capacity in food system governance

Capacity has been built amongst farmers to become FRT members, and from there to form and manage structures such as the Board of Trustees, the FRT Executive Committees, and the General Assembly. One of the promoters interviewed spoke about how SFHC’s training has helped her build her leadership skills for managing community groups. The commitment and subsequent trust in the FRTs are also evident in the high attendance of the monthly FRT community meetings where knowledge and other relevant information is shared.



4.5.6 Extended influence on government extension and traditional leadership

SFHC collaborates with the District Agriculture Extension Coordinating Committee (DAECC) together with other NGOs in field days and agriculture fairs. The links with local village heads has also assisted with protection of the local environment; one headman said he promotes “controlled grazing” and “forest regeneration” through “development of bylaws”.



4.6 Leadership challenges

SFHC collective leadership has faced several challenges in working towards transforming the local food system. The most prominent of these are detailed below.

4.6.1 Overcoming hegemonic narratives

Based on experience SFHC leadership has learned to anticipate and respond to the unintended consequences that can arise from their interventions. For example, a report written about a participatory action research project conducted by SFHC between 2010 and 2013 notes that farmers identify the main cause of climate change as deforestation, and that they believe if they plant trees that the rains will return (Bezner Kerr et al., 2018). The farmers' understanding of climate change is built on their own observations of deforestation, the research intervention that introduced agroecological approaches as a response to climate change and hegemonic narratives that place the blame for poor rainfall on farmers themselves. The research intervention unintentionally reinforced this understanding of personal responsibility for climate change; this has also been noted by climate change adaptation scholars in other sites (Bezner Kerr et al., 2018).

"These dominant narratives of blaming African farmers for land degradation have a long history in Malawi, and contemporary climate-change narratives appear to build on earlier, colonial and post-colonial notions of destructive farmers that benefit politicians and the timber industry while punishing rural communities" (Mulwafu, 2011 in Bezner Kerr et al., 2018:249). SFHC countered these dynamics by developing their *Farming for Change* curriculum. This curriculum includes a number of sessions relating to climate change designed with and by the local community so that it is relevant and relatable. This has assisted in creating a better understanding of climate change. It has also helped the SFHC collective leadership network and the communities they serve to identify the most important aspects to tackle to build household resilience to climate change.

4.6.2 Influencing national policy

The shift towards more sustainable food systems approaches at a policy level has been slow but this is changing.

A recently produced policy brief on agroecology potential reviewed "19 agrarian and environmental policies, key strategic plans and parliamentary acts of Malawi in order to understand the level of agroecology support within current policies" (Bezner Kerr et al., 2024:6).

The overall level of alignment with agroecology is low, with the National Seed Policy and the Pesticides Act showing the lowest alignment. One interviewee described the Seed Policy as particularly problematic as it does not support farmer-saved seeds. However, there is increasing recognition of AE at government level, and work towards policy alignment is continuing. An important contribution to this shift has been the increase in networking and multistakeholder (govt, CSO, private sector, farmers etc) collaboration around AE in recent years.

SFHC is actively involved in these networks and collaborative processes. They are a member of a number of networks locally and internationally and foster strong relationships with a range of stakeholders including government (local and national), CSOs and academic institutions. The increase in cooperation of actors from across the food system is having a positive effect with one interviewee noting, *"So it [change] is a long term thing and I do see changes, like maybe 15 years ago there was no networking and no networks. And now there is ... a sense of a growing movement"*

4.6.3 Complexity of working at landscape level

Transforming the local food system is a complex undertaking that requires a coordinated effort by many different stakeholders. For this reason SFHC has started working at a landscape level. This entails collaborating with a "multitude of stakeholders and get[ting] them to work together". According to a representative of the SFHC secretariat; this is a difficult task. To succeed a range of stakeholders with different agendas and focus areas, agriculture, water, energy, environment, health, finance etc need to work together in a coordinated, unified way. Developing a share vision and way of working, and putting this into practice is an intensive undertaking which requires a lot of time and resources.

The farmers' understanding of climate change is built on their own observations of deforestation, the research intervention that introduced agroecological approaches as a response to climate change and hegemonic narratives that place the blame for poor rainfall on farmers themselves. The research intervention unintentionally reinforced this understanding of personal responsibility for climate change; this has also been noted by climate change adaptation scholars in other sites (Bezner Kerr et al., 2018).



4.7 Study limitations and areas for further research

The researchers were unable to assess changes to policy, given the complexity of determining attribution versus contribution. In the time frame of this study, they were not able to collect sufficient data to evaluate the impact of SFHC's leadership network on local government policies and programmes. Given SFHC's strong relationships with local government and their policy work this would be interesting area for further exploration in the future.

A further limitation is that insufficient data was collected from fellow/follower farmers to determine to what extent, if any, the fellow/follower farmers perceive themselves to be part of a collective leadership network.

SFHC is clearly a valued member in a number of networks and collaborates broadly and well. The way SFHC fits into and contributes to these broader networks was not a focus of this study and is an area that could warrant further research. There could be leadership networks within leadership networks or different configurations of leadership networks. Therefore, it would be worth exploring the SFHC role and relationships within these networks (e.g., coalitions with civil society organisations across the region) and effects of the participation in these networks on SFHC's leadership network as outlined in this case study and vice-versa.

To determine the extent to which collective leadership has been entrenched into the broader food system, locally, regionally and potentially continentally, more work needs to be done. This would include understanding their conception of a food system transition and the role that they play within that, as well as gauging their level of agency to drive transformation of the local system.

4.8 Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated the **characteristics** and **capabilities** of the collective leadership system in which SFHC works, unpacking the following:

- **Definition of collective leadership:** SFHC's collective leadership system is a distributed leadership system. Therefore, it is defined as a leadership arrangement made up of many different role players at different levels, stretching across formal and informal structures and leaders. SFHC's system includes staff and volunteers, farmers, village headmen and academics.
- **Interpretation of food systems and food system transformation:** Initially focusing primarily on nutrition and agricultural shifts SFHC's interpretation of a food system and food system change has broadened. It has evolved based on research and lessons learned, broadening their scope over the years to work across multiple areas including gender, climate change, agriculture, health and nutrition, and water management, finding ways to address and engage with these different aspects simultaneously, being acutely aware of the interrelated nature of these areas of work. SFHC acknowledges that transforming the food system will require working at a landscape level where multiple systems – food, water, health, energy, etc. – intersect. The impetus for all their work, and the broadened scope thereof, is always the needs of the community they support.
- **Scale:** The collective leadership system in this case study, while distributed, is working at a localised level. Showing that it is possible and indeed important to affect change not only at national, continental or global levels but that these kinds of shifts can be initiated locally and result in significant and growing shifts.
- **Transformation versus transition:** SFHC's collective leadership network has and continues to support shifts towards more sustainable and inclusive food systems. It is clear that while full transformation has not occurred there have been significant shifts over time including in terms of sustainable food production, food security, gender relations and health.

These successes have been due to SFHC's integrated and holistic approach whereby all projects and funding streams are vetted to ensure they contribute to the overall goal and have thus sustained the work done over many years.

This also means their work remains responsive and relevant, therefore allowing for slow, but consistent transitions towards the desired transformation.

In summary, SFHC's collective leadership network is contributing to shifts towards more sustainable and inclusive food systems. The characteristics and arrangements that have led to the capability of this leadership system to affect change include working with a diverse group of stakeholders in a long-term relational way, harnessing the voices of thousands of farmers far outside SFHC's locus of operations through a democratic governance structure – creating collective leadership, working in and around context, and using creativity to shift stubborn dynamics, such as gender inequality. In

addition, it is necessary to have a shared vision, evolve and improve based on evidence, be fluid and flexible, and leaders must hold long-term trust relationships and be respectful and inclusive of a range of stakeholders, as well as adaptable, humble, able to listen, relatable and approachable, have good communication skills and understand and be able to effectively navigate local power structures and institutions.

Although SFHC's collective leadership system has had limited success influencing policy shifts, it has managed to effectively influence power dynamics in the locality co-opting local leadership to support their work and fostering more equal gender arrangements to the benefit of the larger community. In addition, as households involved in SFHC's work become more food secure and resilient to climate change, all role players in SFHC's network are motivated to continue and expand the work and practices contributing to a food systems change in the locality.

5. Case Study 2: CNOP-CAM: Cameroon

5.1 Introduction

This case study explores the leadership arrangements of Concertation Nationale des Organisations Paysannes du Cameroun (*National Confederation of Peasants' Organisations of Cameroon*) (CNOP-CAM) in Cameroon in central Africa. CNOP-CAM is a national umbrella association of farmer organisations that provides support to its constituents (technical and leadership training and micro-financing) and lobbies for their interests at the national and regional levels.

Based on a literature review, interviews and focus group discussions (See Annex 3 for a detailed overview of the research approach), the case study describes the collective leadership approach that CNOP-CAM has developed by building the capacity of farmer organisations, elevating farmers' needs to government and driving CNOP-CAM's inclusion in regional and continental policy processes.

As CNOP-CAM has worked to shift power in the food system back to farmers, they have developed a leadership approach characterised by high levels of transparency and trust, inclusivity in governance structures, engagement with key decision makers outside the organisation and strategically drawing on resources beyond their national borders.

5.2 Setting the scene: Cameroon

The World Bank classifies Cameroon as a lower-middle-income country, with a mixed economy heavily reliant on agriculture, oil and gas production, and services; in recent years it has experienced moderate economic growth driven by these sectors (Aikins, 2024). Cameroon's limited access to reliable infrastructure hinders its economic development and hampers opportunities for communities, particularly in rural areas (Aoudi Chance & Florence, 2023). Reported governance issues such as corruption, inefficiency and lack of transparency pose challenges to sustainable development by hindering accountability and inclusive growth (World Bank, 2015; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). The country, however, is considered to have made progress in various development indicators over the years, such as healthcare and education, with improvements in

life expectancy, literacy rates and school enrolment. Poverty and inequality levels remain high with many people, especially in rural areas, continuing to face challenges such as accessing basic services, healthcare, education and employment opportunities (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

Cameroon is largely considered an agrarian society; the agricultural sector reportedly employs 70% the workforce and generates 44% of gross domestic product and 30% of export revenue (Pragma International, 2020). Smallholder farmers are estimated to make up more than 80% percent of the sector (World Food Programme, 2023). As in other African countries, continued promotion of industrial-style agriculture has resulted in farmer dependency on external synthetic inputs, which are typically subsidised. The national agricultural input subsidy programme, called *Programme National de Subvention des Intrants Agricoles*, has been criticised for promoting this model, which damages soils and broader ecosystems (Jean, Nourou & Bouba, 2020).

As climate change impacts worsen in Cameroon – via shifts in rainfall patterns and extreme weather events – negative effects on agricultural production will deepen poverty, increasing social tensions and the risk of conflict (International Monetary Fund, 2024). The need to import food will place further burdens on an already financially constrained government and hinder socioeconomic development (International Monetary Fund, 2024).

It is clear that improving lives in Cameroon requires urgent food system transformation due to the huge numbers of households reliant on agricultural production for both income and nutrition. An umbrella body like CNOP-CAM thus has the potential to make a significant contribution to driving this transformation, provided its leaders can work effectively to organise their farmer organisation members and lobby government to change and enact policies that promote sustainability and improved livelihoods. Of course, food system transformation requires systems leadership that works across scales and sectors. Understanding the leadership arrangements (characteristics) and practices, as well as the impacts CNOP-CAM has already achieved can therefore enhance our understanding of the kind of leadership required to transform the food system in Cameroon.



Cameroon is largely considered an agrarian society; the **agricultural sector** reportedly **employs 70%** the **workforce** and **generates 44%** of **gross domestic product** and **30% of export revenue** (Pragma International, 2020).



5.3 Formation of the collective leadership arrangement

5.3.1 Establishment of CNOP-CAM

CNOP-CAM was born out of crisis. Structural adjustment programmes were introduced in Cameroon in the late 1980s and early 1990s as part of economic reforms mandated by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. As part of these reforms, state-owned agricultural enterprises and cooperatives were dismantled and input subsidies for fertiliser and seed reduced. This withdrawal of government support for the agricultural sector resulted in increased production costs for farmers, limited access to resources and market volatility. These all had a marked negative impact on smallholder farmers and further exacerbated poverty in rural areas in Cameroon.

Initial attempts in the 1990s by a Swiss non-governmental organisation and Cameroonian farmers to create their own representative body – The Peasant Federations Council of Cameroon – were unsuccessful. This body did not meet the expectations and needs of farmer members, who were not in favour of the international organisation having so much influence over the council. In 1998, farmers came together to issue a call for a new organisation to support them and build a sense of solidarity in the farmer movement.

Some of the farmers approached Elisabeth Atangana and asked her to take up the role of setting up this new organisation. Elisabeth is a United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization Special Ambassador for Co-operatives; current president of CNOP-CAM, and past president of both PROPAC and the Pan-African Farmers' Organisation (PAFO). In addition, Elisabeth owns a banana, vegetable and pig farm, and is involved in a training centre that incubates farming enterprises, 30 kilometres from Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital.

The first task undertaken was a mapping of all farmer and producer organisations in Cameroon to understand their visions, work, strengths and weaknesses, along with their needs. These organisations identified their core needs as bridging the support gaps left by structural adjustment programmes along with information services, training and capacity building. They also noted the need to focus on gender and youth issues, and to grow their capacity to self-organise, dialogue and negotiate with state actors.

In December 2000, 59 farmer organisations across the country heeded the call to attend a general assembly to

establish a national umbrella organisation for farmers' organisations. Working to support, mobilise and represent farmers at various levels. CNOP-CAM was formally registered in 2001 as a non-profit, apolitical 'national association' under Cameroonian law.



We realised we had to be able to organise ourselves to firstly identify critical issues farmers were facing, to then discuss these, to agree on how to resolve these and lastly to advocate for support from the public sphere and to make sure they would address our concern in a relevant and adequate manner.

– Interviewee: CNOP-CAM president

5.3.2 Emergent need for a regional organisation

In the early 2000s, subsequent to CNOP-CAM's formation, the need to create a regional-level organisation to represent farmers' interests became pressing. The New Partnership for Africa's Development had been established in 2001, a new food security agenda was being promoted by international institutions and foundations, and free trade agreements were being developed between the European Union and the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. Some within CNOP-CAM were concerned that without regional organisations to represent farmers in international discussions, the needs of family farmers would not feature on the agenda.

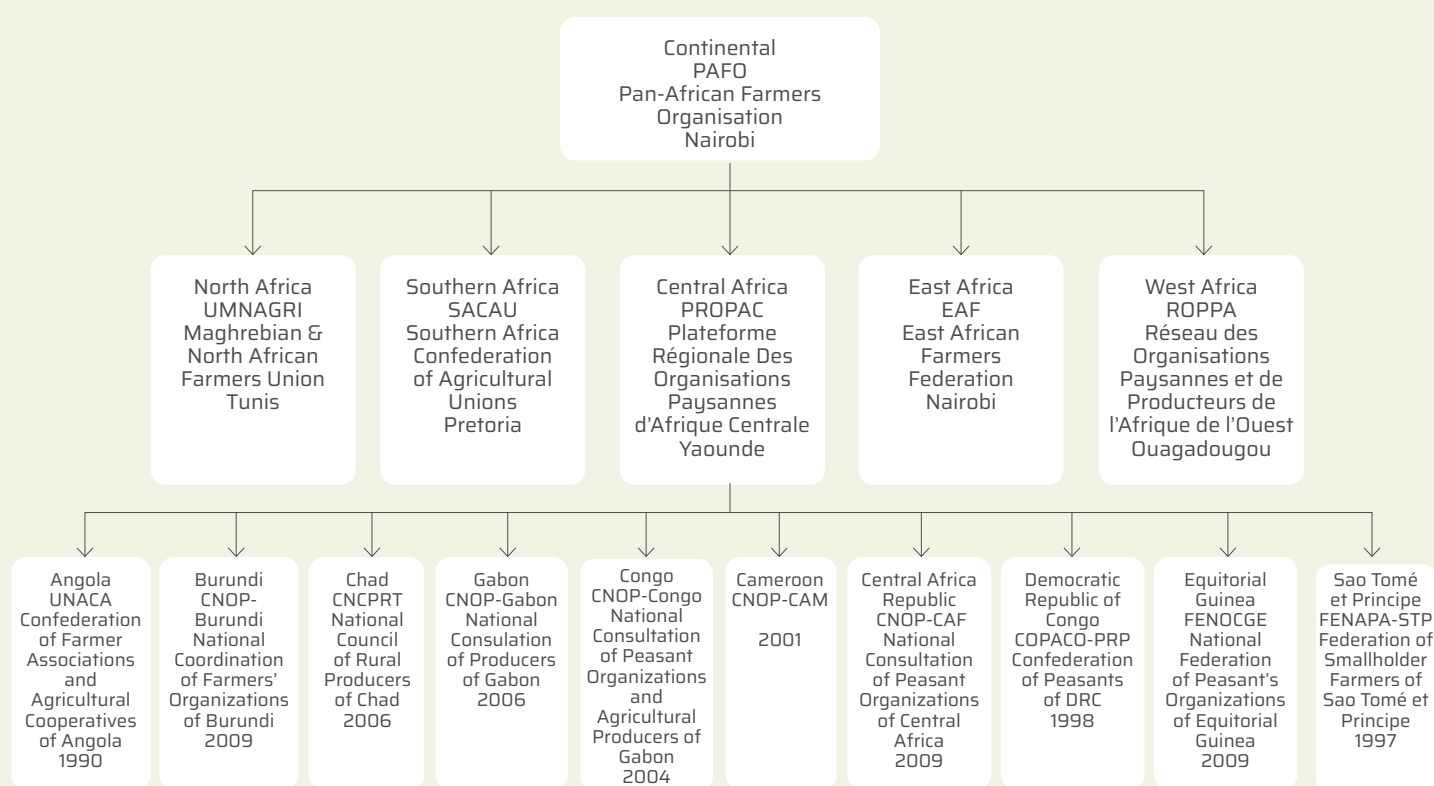
There was not, however, clear consensus within CNOP-CAM at the time on whether to invest energy into creating a regional organisation. CNOP-CAM leadership managed to convince its members to support the process by underlining the impacts that national and international trade agreements could have on them, and the benefits that could be gained by building momentum for greater investment in agriculture (Farming Matters, 2012).

With support from the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, four national country bodies were established, resulting in the establishment of PROPAC in 2005. As a founding member, CNOP-CAM was instrumental in creating this organisation, which represents farmer organisations at regional and international levels.

PROPAC focuses on aspects such as seed systems, land tenure, inter-regional trade and youth entrepreneurship, as well as organising training on free trade agreements, advocacy and leadership for its member organisations. Today, PROPAC comprises 10 national farmer organisations in the Central African region, each with a representative on the PROPAC Administrative Council that meets twice a year. PROPAC also manages strategic relationships with institutional partnerships and fundraises for the national organisations.

The affiliation with PROPAC and PAFO, a continental organisation comprising five regional farmers' networks founded in 2010, has enabled CNOP-CAM to create and maintain relationships with the African Union and regional economic communities, such as the Economic Community of Central African States and the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa, which form part of PAFO membership. Figure 3 below shows how CNOP-CAM fits into this continental network.

FIGURE 3 Composition of PAFO



5.3.3 CNOP-CAM's core focus and governance structure

CNOP-CAM has always worked at two key 'levels' in the food system: the local level of individual farmer organisations and the national and regional levels of policy influence.

At the local level, CNOP-CAM works to improve farmer livelihoods by strengthening farmer organisations by providing training to strengthen financial management, leadership, production and entrepreneurial skills. CNOP-CAM supports sourcing inputs in bulk to enable value chain development from production through to processing to facilitate the emergence of agri-businesses in the country.

At the national level, CNOP-CAM aims to elevate farmers' concerns and facilitates engagement with national government. Because the initial impetus for CNOP-CAM's formation came from farmers, CNOP-CAM was able to start building legitimacy and today the organisation positions itself as a partner of the State of Cameroon carrying out public interest missions in the development of the agricultural and rural sector in favour of smallholder producer organisations. In addition, CNOP-CAM was a key driver in the initiation of the regional PROPAC body, ensuring that the needs of Cameroonian farmers are represented in regional and continental policy processes. Since 2008, CNOP-CAM

has increasingly focussed on promoting agroecology, organic practices and defending farmer-managed seed systems, to promote sustainable family farming.

The governance structure is represented in Figure 4. CNOP-CAM is directed by the wishes of the farmer organisation members via its General Assembly, its main deliberative and decision-making body that meets once a year and aims to include as many representatives as possible. The National Consultation Council, elected by the General Assembly for three-year terms, is responsible for providing strategic guidance to the Administrative Secretariat for the day-to-day running of the organisation. The National Consultation Council comprises representatives of the 10 regions (provinces) of the country, who are presidents of farmer organisations themselves, as well as youth and women representatives. This group meets at least once a year in person with several additional virtual meetings. Each regional representative is also assigned one or more 'thematic areas' of focus, for example, the central region representative oversees 'women, empowerment, societies and culture' as well as 'pastoral and beekeeping sectors, sesame, yam, manioc and potatoes'. These focus areas guide allocation of potential project funds as they become available. The small Administrative Secretariat is the only body in which people are remunerated for their time. The number of programme officers varies depending on funded projects.

FIGURE 4 CNOP-CAM governance structure



In its 2020-2025 strategic plan, CNOP-CAM outlines their wish to further decentralise their structures; an interviewee explained that their ideal structure would have 'councils' at local, district and regional (provincial) levels so that they can provide more direct support to grassroots level organisations. In addition, this decentralised structure would allow CNOP-CAM to better link to government at these levels. In the past few years, the Cameroonian government is finally beginning to implement their decentralisation policy to devolve authority to local level structures, including land governance. Given the size of the country and the great diversity among CNOP-CAM members, the president lamented that the structure reflected in Figure 4 is still not one that they consider their "ideal organogram";

unfortunately, sourcing funding for institutional development is extremely challenging.

5.4 Achievements of CNOP-CAM

Understanding the changes that CNOP-CAM has been able to achieve provides insight into the characteristics of the leadership system that they have developed. CNOP-CAM is open about the fact that limited resources have hampered their ability to undertake effective monitoring and evaluation to systematically measure and quantify their outcomes. The achievements below are those reported by the respondents in the data collection process.

5.4.1 Enhanced collective self-organisation

From the 1990s, as government withdrew direct support to smallholders in line with the requirements of structural adjustment programmes, large agribusinesses and corporate interests have increased their power and influence in Cameroon's food and farming system. As the original impetus for its formation, this has been a significant area of focus and achievement for CNOP-CAM. CNOP-CAM has increased the capacity of many farmer organisations to work together to improve members' livelihoods, as well as to engage directly with government to call for policy change and to access support. It has done this by training local leaders who, in turn, support farmers to structure themselves into collectives, including cooperatives.

Multiple interviewees explained that 'solidarity' is a key feature of Cameroonian culture, and many farmers were already organised into informal groups but needed support in structuring themselves to be more effective. CNOP-CAM encourages the formation of cooperatives. Although more difficult to establish and maintain, cooperatives are eligible for government and donor funding, thus providing more potential than informal groupings for accessing financial benefits. CNOP-CAM's current member cooperatives range in size from 50 to 400 members with varying levels of complexity in their governance structures. Two of the regional (provincial) interviewees noted that the leadership training they had received from CNOP-CAM had helped them to better serve their farmer constituencies and set up effective structures.

CNOP-CAM has actively helped to form around 70% of its current member organisations.

Satisfaction with CNOP-CAM's work in this regard is also evidenced by the fact that member organisations continue to pay their annual membership fees to the organisation. A cooperative representative in the focus group discussion noted that: "The membership fee is insignificant compared to the benefits I get from CNOP-CAM."

5.4.2 Improved advocacy capacity

Engaging with government to reorient food and farming frameworks requires advocacy capacity. At the national level, one of CNOP-CAM's key focus areas is lobbying, negotiating and undertaking advocacy work with government. It has developed strong relationships with some ministries and sits

on decision-making bodies like the National Agricultural Investment Programme. It is thus able to escalate demands from farmers to government ministers directly and to keep farmer organisations informed about proceedings and about opportunities that arise that could benefit them.

CNOP-CAM's achievements in strengthening farmer-led advocacy are displayed through the successful attempts by the *Cooprovinooun* cooperative to regain control over a tomato-processing company that had been taken over by the state. The company was originally set up as a joint venture between *Cooprovinooun* and the state; the cooperative raised 27 million Central African Franc to own 51% of the company. In 2016, however, government inexplicably took control of the company. *Cooprovinooun*, with support from CNOP-CAM, launched an advocacy campaign to reclaim their share. CNOP-CAM provided intensive advocacy training for cooperative members and assisted in arranging and then accompanying *Cooprovinooun* to meetings with government. In 2018, the Prime Minister ordered an inter-ministerial commission to investigate the matter, which eventually resulted in recognition of the cooperative's shareholding. Unfortunately, during the period of government control, the officials involved mismanaged the company, racking up significant debts and stock losses. CNOP-CAM assisted *Cooprovinooun* further by facilitating meetings with the Italian ambassador and private investors that could potentially assist with the organisation's financial troubles and/or facilitate market access.

This story underscores the crucial role that CNOP-CAM played in navigating tensions, as well as shifting the power dynamics in favour of *Cooprovinooun*. The cooperative initially lacked the advocacy skills and resources to address the issue at higher government levels. CNOP-CAM's unyielding support, including providing access to and challenging ministries, helped *Cooprovinooun* in its ongoing struggle. It shows that CNOP-CAM is able to work with other sectors (like private business) in achieving its aim of supporting its farmer members. The cooperative leaders we interviewed acknowledged that CNOP-CAM's support has empowered them to maintain ongoing relationships with various government officials.



At the ministry, for example, we interact directly with the Minister... It's the Deputy Director that we meet most often, but he's not the only one. There's also the Director of Agricultural Development, the Minister's Private Secretary and the Chief of Staff. In short, in every position in the Ministry, there are interactions that are part of the lobbying. – Interviewee: Cooperative leader

CNOP-CAM is increasingly trying to build networks that can advance its aims; in 2022, it convened a multi-stakeholder meeting to critically review national agricultural frameworks and to advocate for better support for family farms. An interviewee explained that there was generally a lack of transparency about government processes, and hence the importance of CNOP-CAM's advocacy work.

A CNOP-CAM representative noted that: *"We have not received any feedback from the minister – we will only know when the Law is passed. And then our role is to get familiar with it, and to organize trainings on the ground to make farmers aware of the new law"*.

5.4.3 Improved access to land for women and youth

The current Land Act mandates that one can only apply for a title deed for customary land if the applicant has been using the land from before 1974; meaning that in 2024, the applicant would need to be at least 50 years of age. This significantly limits access for youth from acquiring land formally. In addition, the process of obtaining a land title can be prohibitively expensive due to additional fees for intermediary persons. These conditions are real obstacles to securing property interests and

few many Cameroonians, even those from a lineage that has developed land but not registered it, may face difficulties to assert their property rights. They can, however, acquire land tenure rights through concessions.

Cameroonian women struggle to access land to live on and to farm. This also means they cannot use land as collateral to access credit. While there are no legal provisions explicitly excluding women from accessing land, traditional practices in this regard are still prevalent. One interviewee explained that, when marrying, women were considered to be marrying into their husband's family and consequently 'belonging to their husband' – and therefore have no need to own land in their own right. Today, many men still refuse to grant land to women; a farmer representative in a focus group discussion said that: *"Women are thought to just be good for being married and access to land has traditionally not been a right given to them."*

CNOP-CAM has worked with the Women's Land Rights for Inclusive Development and Growth in Africa, PROPAC, AFSA and International Land Coalition – *"sensitising traditional authorities"* to change perceptions and develop a better understanding of the law. Usually, the organisation endeavours to convene the traditional authority, local committees, the mayor and city council as they all have a role or potential influence in granting access to land. CNOP-CAM's president feels this is one area where their efforts *"combined with the advocacy efforts of others"* have been *"bearing fruit over the years"* as they are seeing more women involved in local chiefdoms and more rights to use land being granted to women by traditional authorities. Women have been empowered to speak up about access to land and are increasingly successful in this regard. A farmer representative in a focus group discussion stated that: *"When I returned from the training on land tenure at CNOP-CAM, I met with my husband and the traditional authority in my village to request them to gain access to land. And now I have a space that allows me to produce".*

5.4.4 Improved enterprise development and access to market

CNOP-CAM has also responded to farmers' needs for training to develop their technical capacity to improve productivity. Interviewees specifically noted the benefits that they had gained from CNOP-CAM training. Besides technical training, CNOP-CAM also supports member organisations to set up micro-finance initiatives, particularly needed by women and youth farmers. The cooperative representatives interviewed noted the importance of this financial facility. Micro-finance is available for a range of reasons, from purchasing inputs to hospital fees and children's education. An interviewed cooperative leader stated that:



Sometimes you just stand there, and someone knocks on the door and says my child is going to die, we need to get him to hospital. And it's not just the children, sometimes they're sick themselves.

They also come to take out loans to increase the surface area. Today there are more than 20 members who have increased their production capacity thanks to the cooperative.

Some cooperatives have 'community fields' where members come together to produce crops and the income gained is used to finance the cooperative costs, including equipment, operating costs and salaries. These community fields are also used to help members who have limited access to productive land, mainly women. One cooperative leader explained that this is also a way in which to gather and understand the needs of farmer members, noting that: *"In our cluster, our exchange space is the community field, it's this space where farmers feel free and more comfortable to clearly express*

the problems they encounter, and these problems I bring back to our meetings with the board members [of the cooperative].”

Another key element for many member organisations is establishing shared infrastructure, such as cold room storage in which members can rent space to prolong perishable crops. This allows farmers to stagger their sales while they look for better prices or for buyers. One of the longer-running cooperatives even owns three vehicles that members can rent to transport crops. An interviewed Cooperative leaders noted that:

Once the product has been sold to the shop, a percentage is automatically deducted when the machine or vehicle is used. We have three vehicles (a lorry and 2 saddlebags) and three processing machines. The result of all this is that it reduces losses and strengthens resilience.

Moving beyond the focus on farm-level productivity to development of markets, CNOP-CAM works to develop specific value chains within traditional agroecological zones; for example, rice and potato value chains in the North-West region (province) and sweet potatoes in the Adamaoua region (province).

As part of their efforts to promote market access for their members, CNOP-CAM had provided support (training and equipment) to a group of farmers that came together to aggregate local produce for sale. Initial success meant they formalised into a commercial operation; reseller organisations (aggregators) like this are price setters and tend to have a lot of power. CNOP-CAM had hoped that this organisation could become a model for a “commercialisation leg” of CNOP-CAM that would source only from CNOP-CAM farmer organisations. To make bigger profits, however, the company eventually started sourcing from larger producers, rather than the smaller farmers CNOP-CAM had hoped they would support. CNOP-CAM has since adjusted their ambition towards working on “cohesive territorial markets” that better support agroecological farmers.

5.5 Insights into CNOP-CAM’s collective leadership arrangement

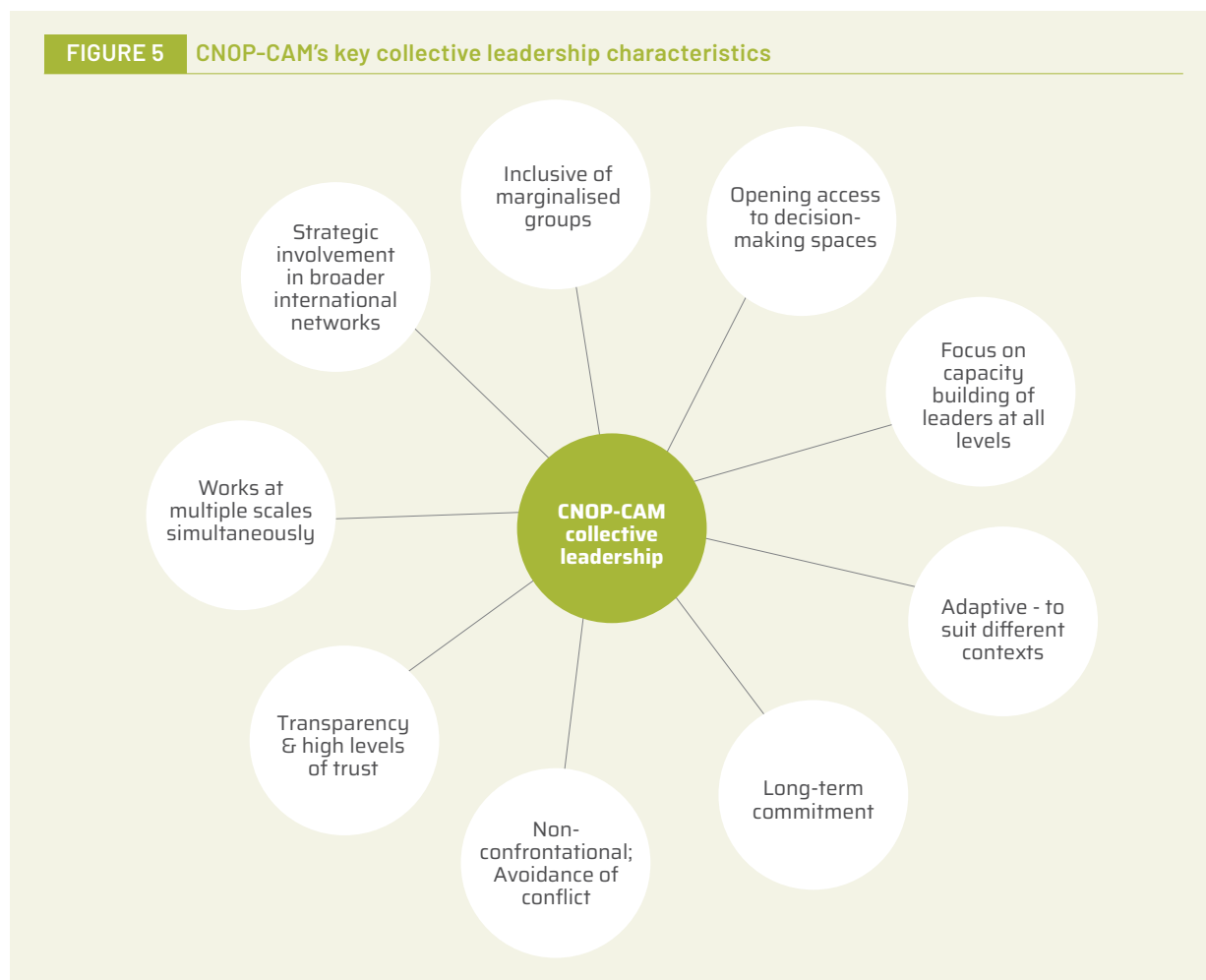
Given its limited resources, including no direct government support, the previous section shows that CNOP-CAM has undertaken impressive work in building technical, financial and advocacy skills among its member farmer organisations and farmers to build leadership capacity around food sovereignty.

In addition, CNOP-CAM has focused on the wider system, engaging at the regional and international levels to broaden the influence of its members over external factors influencing the food and farming system in the country.



The characteristics of CNOP-CAM's leadership arrangement that have supported the emergence of collective food system leadership in the country are summarised in Figure 5 below and described in the following sub-sections (some are grouped together in the text).

FIGURE 5 CNOP-CAM's key collective leadership characteristics



5.5.1 Inclusive of marginalised groups

Although women are seminal actors in the agricultural world and often organised through solidarity institutions (e.g., stokvels/collective savings groups) at the village level, historically they have been given very limited recognition within farmer organisations. The same is true for youth and minority groups/vulnerable people (such as the Pygmies living in Cameroon).

Since its establishment, CNOP-CAM has explicitly included women, youth and marginalised groups in its structures and ensured they have equal ability to participate and to have their voices heard. Young women make up a third of all people represented in their member organisations. In recent years, CNOP-CAM has made a conscious decision to provide more training opportunities to women and youth. A regional (provincial) leader expressed how impressed she was when they

told CNOP-CAM's president that they wanted greater involvement of women in a government-facilitated project: *"she organised a meeting with the minister ... and off we went, and we were heard by the minister"*.

5.5.2 Opening access to decision-making spaces

CNOP-CAM has facilitated entry points to engagement with government that help to build the necessary individual leadership skills within its farmer organisations. This helps to build leadership capacity throughout the organisation. It does not act as a gatekeeper controlling access to government but rather extends this as broadly as possible. Different strategies are deployed in different contexts to build leadership agency. In some parts of the country, there are well-capacitated farmer organisations and in others, not. CNOP-CAM focuses on what is needed in each area.



Although women are seminal actors in the agricultural world and often organised through solidarity institutions (e.g., stokvels/collective savings groups) at the village level, historically they have been given very limited recognition within farmer organisations.



For example, in the western part of Cameroon, people perceive the government as being oppressive and they are afraid to speak out publicly on some issues. CNOP-CAM's work in this area is to create a more enabling environment and facilitate dialogue between farmer organisations and the local government. In the Central region (province), farmer organisations were able to engage with government but were unsure as to which processes to follow.

*CNOP-CAM thus takes a differentiated approach to opening access to decision-making spaces depending on the need and context. The organisation has also recently established a multi-stakeholder platform comprising farmer organisations, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, media, consumers and government representatives from the food, health, land, environment and sustainable development sectors. The goal is to amplify the advocacy work undertaken by and on behalf of farmer organisations.

5.5.3 Long-term commitment to changing the system

Many of the leaders who helped to found CNOP-CAM are still part of CNOP-CAM today. Similarly, around 60% of the original member organisations remain as members today. Attrition is linked to the death of farmer organisation leaders, or to an organisation having "reached autonomy". Elisabeth Atangana has been the leader of CNOP-CAM since inception. Interviewees note that her active involvement – from the field to the policy level – and her patience and ability to manage conflict and criticism have been instrumental in organisational development. They also indicated that the organisation has well-developed methodologies and tools and that leadership throughout the organisation has been well-trained to manage the emergent and complex challenges that arise in this work. Those interviewed noted that they had no doubt that the organisation would persist over time because of this, although the eventual resignation of their founder would clearly leave big shoes to be filled.

The organisation has also managed to attract those 'working for the cause'. Only five people within CNOP-CAM's structures are salaried, the other ten who undertake day-to-day work are volunteers. Consultants or temporary staff are only brought on for specific projects and are funded through project funds.

5.5.4 Peaceful, non-confrontational and transparent

There has been more than one instance where other organisations have tried to compete with CNOP-CAM or set up new networks that would be very similar to CNOP-CAM in terms of scope and/or potential member organisations. The attitude of the CNOP-CAM leaders is to participate widely and always try to negotiate peaceful solutions with other organisations in order to ensure all can work together. CNOP-CAM is also clear about breaking away from other networks if there is too much divergence in their visions.

The transparency of the CNOP-CAM leadership was mentioned as a key reason why there are such high levels of respect and trust in the organisation. Interviewees from the National Consultation Council noted that:

We know what is going on, any information you want to get, you get it, they expose everything. No-one makes any decision alone, there are always 10 leaders involved... When there is transparency, there is love and there is no chance for people to create problems, and when you see that communication is flowing, you see that you will not have problems.



A key strategy for CNOP-CAM has been to remain non-partisan and politically neutral in order to foster positive relationships with key government ministries. It is a careful balance to maintain though, because they must also be able to engage the state when farmers' livelihoods are at stake. This focus on transparency also speaks to collective leadership. It indicates that CNOP-CAM remains in a role of capacity building and enabler of individual leadership throughout the system.

5.5.5 Working in the broader system

Involvement in regional and international networks, like PROPAC and PAFO, allows CNOP-CAM to gain a platform for advocacy that extends beyond national borders. This ensures that the needs of Cameroon's family farmers are being represented in policy processes of the regional economic communities, the African

Union Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme, as well as the Committee on World Food Security processes that PROPAC and their funder, International Fund for Agricultural Development, are involved in.

In addition, CNOP-CAM is involved in broader coalitions like the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa and the International Land Coalition. Being active in these regional and international networks builds CNOP-CAM's legitimacy and garners support for CNOP-CAM's advocacy, lobbying and negotiation campaigns, which can in turn promote greater authority back in Cameroon.

5.6 Leadership challenges

5.6.1 Maintaining a common vision for the organisation

CNOP-CAM works with a diverse range of stakeholders and undertakes interventions at different levels of the food system. It is unsurprising then that the national leadership identified one of their key challenges as maintaining of a clear common vision. They noted that gaining buy-in across their range of stakeholders is an ongoing and resource-intensive process. Maintaining transparency assists them in managing the tensions between stakeholders.

5.6.2 Limited financial and human resources

The scope of CNOP-CAM's work is impressive given the extremely limited resources that they have to work with. They not only undertake advocacy at the national level but also need to feed into and stay abreast of international and regional processes via PROPAC and PAFO while providing technical and financial support for hundreds of farmer organisations on the ground.

In addition to this, the salaried staff members manage several donor- and government-funded projects with the associated reporting requirements to ensure the financial sustainability of the organisation. These projects provide for 80% of income for CNOP-CAM, with the balance being gained from member fees.

CNOP-CAM has made efforts to help farmer organisations develop into autonomous business entities, but this requires long-term support, including the development of adequate financial and administrative capacity. CNOP-CAM notes that as it is undertaking a public service, it

should be subsidised by government, but its current legal form as a national association disqualifies it from any state support. Registering as a non-governmental or public interest organisation would enable access to state support but could possibly upset member organisations who would prefer it remain as a common interest grouping.

5.6.3 Corruption

Corruption takes many forms in Cameroon's food and farming sector. Agricultural extension officers are accused of expecting farmers to pay for their fuel and food to visit the farm and give advice and some government staff have become farmers to benefit from government projects and support. Interviewees noted that corruption was pervasive in the civil service, although this is likely due to the need to gain decent living wages. An example of civil service corruption was the levying of unofficial 'fees' on top of the official ones for any transactions.

It is difficult for CNOP-CAM to intervene, particularly as it is often impossible to gain adequate evidence to take legal measures. Instead, they lobby for official fees to be reduced and work to educate farmers, particularly women and the youth, about their rights and how to challenge the imposition of unofficial fees and levies.

5.7 Study limitations and areas for future research

There are several limitations to the study. The research team had not worked directly with the organisation used in this case and therefore needed more time to navigate the case context and build relationships with local researchers, and with the organisation and its network members.

The language barrier initially posed a problem, but this was overcome by employing local French-speakers involved in the sector to conduct the focus group discussions and a translator for online sessions. CNOP-CAM undertakes a significant range of work spanning technical training to lobbying, advocacy and negotiation efforts, and it took time to uncover entry points into the leadership discussion that would make sense to the different stakeholders engaged with the organisation. Using a grounded theory approach enabled the findings described in this case study to emerge from the research itself.

The language barrier initially posed a problem, but this was overcome by employing local French-speakers involved in the sector to conduct the focus group discussions and a translator for online sessions.



Future research into CNOP-CAM's leadership arrangements could focus on the understanding within the organisation of the determinants that need to be in place to support collective leadership, and to ascertain whether the organisation could use these determinants in a more cohesive way to bring about its vision.

5.8 Conclusion

In summary, the capabilities of the CNOP-CAM leadership network have supported the beginning of transitions towards more inclusive and sustainable food systems in Cameroon.

Through their deep and ongoing support for farmers' organisations, farmers are increasingly capacitated to support each other and develop their enterprises to better participate in value chains. A powerful impact of CNOP-CAM's work has been improving farmer organisations' ability to directly access and influence policymakers. Gains are being made in women's access to land through capacitating women and working with traditional leadership. CNOP-CAM is also driving a stronger voice for farmers in regional and international policy processes.

CNOP-CAM's approach to collective leadership displays key characteristics that have ensured the organisation's longevity and growing food system impacts. Internally, CNOP-CAM is structured to allow local level farmer

organisations' needs to be brought to the national level, ensuring the organisation is focused on meeting these needs. In addition, CNOP-CAM has always been broadly inclusive, ensuring representation for marginalised groups in its membership base and formal leadership positions. The national leadership body has also promoted transparency in its decision making and resource allocation, thereby promoting trust and support from members. Many of the leaders in the network have shown a long-term commitment to the work of CNOP-CAM and are focused on building capacity in the youth to ensure the work continues.

When working with external stakeholders (i.e., government or similar networks), CNOP-CAM always avoids or tries to resolve conflict while not shying away from ensuring its members' interests are protected. To deepen their ability to promote their member's interests, CNOP-CAM has actively participated in setting up regional representative bodies, ensuring greater access to resources for their members and making sure Cameroon's farmers needs are incorporated in these international arenas.

Collective leadership in the food system in Africa requires critical building blocks being in place. Both knowledge and capacity have to be vested in different stakeholder groups throughout the system to enable the agency and support the transition towards sustainability and, ultimately, the transformation of the food system.

6. Cross case study reflections and conclusion

Across the two case studies there are a number of commonalities that emerge regarding the two collective leadership systems. These commonalities are:

- **Born out of crises:** The collective leadership systems were formed at a similar time in the late 1990s in response to similar crises. Structural adjustment processes that resulted in the loss of fertiliser subsidies and higher input costs in both countries, as well as significant child malnutrition and poor soils prompted the formation of the two entities and the ensuing leadership networks.
- **Bottom-up leaderships systems.** Though the agenda of the two collective leadership systems is different, they are both led by farmers for farmers. This aligns with the argument put forward by Pereira et al (2021:13) that food system transformation – especially in Africa – must happen “from the bottom up, where local innovations and initiatives that meet local needs are able to effect systemic change whilst maintaining their contextual nuance”.
- **Shared vision:** Because both organisations are led by farmers for the explicit benefit of those same farmers, there has always been a strong sense of a shared vision. Although this is not without difficulties. In SFHC, there are power dynamics at play and, in some cases, competing priorities, such as academic needs versus those of the organisation. In addition, the focus by leaders is more or less big picture depending on the level at which one is working; for example, at the farmer level, there is more focus on practical processes such as agroecology and food preparation whereas at secretariat level there is a focus on the broader food system and working at a landscape level. This, in turn, means that there is some variation in the shared vision and the way it is articulated. In CNOP-CAM, the tension between the need to work beyond the borders of Cameroon (i.e., at the level of PROPAC and PAFO) is in addition to the tensions that leaders need to manage between the other two levels that are already part of their core mandate (i.e., at the local level to support farmer organisations and at the national level to influence government).
- **Evolving leadership systems in response to contextual need:** Both organisations have evolved, changing over time in response to the needs of the groups they aim to serve. SFHC initially only focused on soil fertility and child malnutrition but expanded its focus to gender, water management, climate change, social dynamics and energy and has now works at a landscape level. In Cameroon, the focus was initially on strengthening farmer organisations’ capacity to effectively meet the needs of their farmer members, while also trying to influence national policy. When the opportunity arose to partner with other national umbrella bodies to form a regional body (PROPAC) and then a continental body PAFO, CNOP-CAM saw the potential benefits and led this process. They have also broadened their scope based on farmer needs to provide training on production and support for bulk input purchasing, micro credit and marketing. More recently they have begun to put more energy into supporting the agroecological movement.
- **Distributed leadership systems:** CNOP-CAM and SFHC’s leadership systems are composed of leaders, both volunteers and paid, that come from different entities, such as farmer cooperatives or local authorities, working at different levels with different sets of expertise and skills. These leaders do not reside within one organisation but across organisations and entities and have varying levels of education. The various leaders within the system hold good relationships and a good understanding of the power dynamics and ways to navigate the spaces in which they work.
- **Champions initiated the networks:** Both leadership systems were initiated/catalysed by strong leaders with a passion for and strong commitment to the cause. In both collective leadership systems, these leaders are still in place. To ameliorate the risk this presents in terms of sustaining the

leadership systems beyond the involvement of these champions, CNOP-CAM and SFHC have worked to ensure that responsibility is distributed and dispersed across various leaders at different levels.

→ **Capacity and agency building of leaders:** There is an understanding within the two collective leadership systems that it is important to invest in and build strong leaders and leadership structures. CNOP-CAM helps to build the capacity of local cooperative structures and local leaders. SFHC trains and support leaders at all levels of staff and in the FRT so they are equipped to creatively manage local power dynamics and support local farmers. Both organisations aim to address societal inequalities and therefore specifically focus on building the capacity of marginalised groups like women and youth.

→ **Transparent and open:** CNOP-CAM and SFHC's leadership systems both value transparency and aim to maintain open lines of communication. As a result, there seem to be high levels of trust in both organisations and in the groups of leaders.

→ **Sustained long term effort and strategic sustained focus** – the collective leadership systems "... prioritise building trust and long-term relationships over short term gains" (Cucchi et al, 2023:22). CNOP-CAM and SFHC have maintained the original objectives with the understanding that achieving food systems change is a long-term process. Critical to achieving this are strong relationships and networks that are built and maintained over time. CNOP CAM have done this at national and regional levels with government and at farmer level with cooperatives and common interest groups across the country. In SFHC and CNOP-CAM, many of the leaders have been part of the organisation for many years demonstrating the commitment to its agenda and the strong relationships established.

→ **Leadership qualities:** A range of qualities of good leaders were identified in both networks, notably passion, commitment, humility, empathetic, good communication skills and listening ability, adaptable and flexible, relatable, trusted, strong understanding of local context and an ability to negotiate power dynamics.

→ **Collective leadership systems need to be well resourced:** For collective leadership systems

to work well, the system needs to be continually and adequately resourced, particularly given the need to develop the capacity of the leaders in the network on an ongoing basis and considering the ever-expanding scope of the work. CNOP-CAM and SFHC have strategically used their limited resources resulting in significant achievements including informing the national, regional and continental policy agenda and serving over 15,000 farming households in Northern Malawi, respectively. Limited resourcing, however, does curtail the abilities of both leadership networks. Both organisations would like to reach even more farmers. Significantly, CNOP-CAM acknowledges the need for more funding to adequately support and build the capacity of farming cooperatives and common interest groups, and to better integrate the work at grassroots level with the policy level work. Whereas SFHC indicated attracting people to carry out administrative tasks like reporting and proposal writing has been a challenge, which leads to the secretariat being overextended.

In addition to the commonalities highlighted above the two case studies confirm the observations made by Cucchi et al. (2023:22) that within leadership networks that are driving systems change, there is a need for leadership to:

- Consider the system as a whole, however, it would appear that it is not necessary for all leaders at all levels to do this. A loose common understanding/ shared vision is important though for maintaining the direction and focus of the leadership network.
- Create a shared vision with stakeholders.
- Encourage and facilitate multi-stakeholder ownership and championship of the system.
- Clearly define roles for coordinators and facilitators. The need for clearly defined roles seems to extend beyond coordinators and facilitators and is required in general within leadership networks. There is also a need for clarity of when different leaders take a leadership role and when they do not.
- Have the ability to learn, adapt and change.
- Have the potential to influence the behaviour of the system.

Lastly the findings that emerge from these case studies affirm arguments regarding a 'decolonial perspective' on food system transformation (Moyo, 2023). The leadership systems in both case study aim to disrupt the status quo of the current food systems, taking context and local needs into consideration. Both leadership networks are guided by farmers who also form part of

the collective leadership system and aim to, among other things, challenge current power dynamics (local and international) and address social inequalities, shift food production and consumption behaviour, and strengthen farmers' bargaining capacity within the intention of creating more inclusive, sustainable and sovereign systems.

7. Areas for further research

These case studies have demonstrated the value of collective leadership systems in two different contexts, with CNOP-CAM working at regional and national policy levels as well as the local farmer level and SFHC working largely at the local farmer level. Both leadership systems, however, form parts of other systems. CNOP-CAM is part of PROPAC and PAFO's systems, as well as networks like the African Organic Network and the International Land Coalition. SFHC is part of multiple national and regional networks, including the Seed and Knowledge Initiative and the Alliance for

Food Sovereignty in Africa. It would be useful to explore the ways these different leadership networks interact and influence one another. The resource needs for each collective leadership systems were not examined in detail in these case studies. It is noted that CNOP-CAM and SFHC have made significant achievements with very limited resources. Further exploration of this and the financial requirements of collective leadership systems to function effectively would be warranted.

8. Appendices

Appendix 1: SFHC Primary data collection activities

A total of 13 interviews were conducted with the founders of SFHC, SFHC management and field staff, FRT members, village heads, government extension officers and project coordinators who have worked with SFHC.

Table 2: Interview participants, SFHC

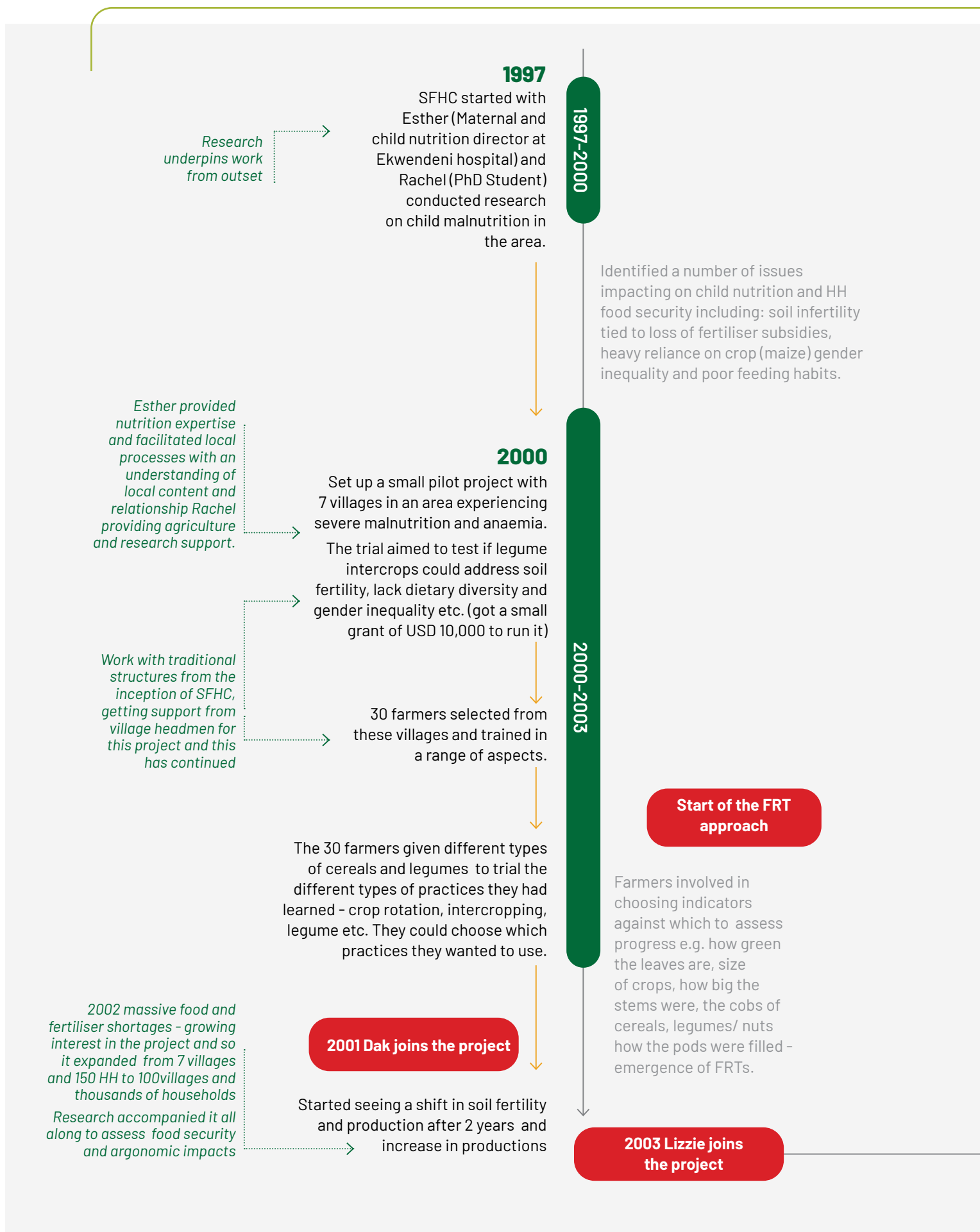
Number	Interviewee
Interview 1	Co-founder of SFHC (Cornell University)(1 female)
Interview 2,3 & 4	Management staff (1 male; 2 females)
Interview 5	Project coordinator and support staff (2 males)
Interview 6 & 7	Promoters (1 male; 1 female)
Interview 8 & 9	FRTs (1 male; 1 female)
Interview 10 & 11	Government extension worker (2 males)
Interview 12 & 13	Group village leaders/headman (2 males)

A total of 4 focus group discussions were held with promoters (SFHC field staff), FRTs and mentee/follower farmers.

Table 3: Focus group discussions, SFHC

Number	Focus group participants
Group 1 & 2	FRT members (8 people per group)
Group 3	Promoters (6 people)
Group 4	Mentee farmers (8 people)

Appendix 2: SFHC formation timeline



Participatory research has continued to underpin all of SFHC's work—exploring climate change adaptation, child feeding, gender etc and expanding focus of work as understanding of local context and needs grows

Therefore, SFHC's approach appears to be iterative and emergent constantly evolving and improving based on continual learning and reflection

Over this period SFHC has increased its areas of focus and work from agriculture, in particular legume diversification. This is based on what emerges by way of the ongoing research and farmer feedback loops they have in place and a growing understanding that many different aspects/issues need to be addressed simultaneously including food security, livelihoods, agricultural production, gender, education etc. Therefore over time the SFHC's activities have expanded to include:

- Cooking demonstrations: to tackle issues of nutrition and gender inequality
- Nutrition and agriculture groups: to address issues relating to malnutrition, gender inequality and poor food production/ food insecurity
- Household budgeting: addressing gender inequality (HH decision making) and financial management
- Learning exchanges, in villages, across communities taking a range of forms including farmer field days, seed exchanges/seed fairs

2018-2024

SFHC continues to expand and broaden the focus of its work recently:

- Running a trial using fuel saving stoves to help reduce deforestation
- Launching 4 local AE markets where farmers can sell excess produce

SFHC are now starting to work at a landscape level.

This entails coordinating stakeholders from and working across multiple systems or sectors including: agriculture, water, health, education

2004-2017

2017

SFHC registers formally registers as an NPO

Continue taking measurements- assessing those in the agriculture nutrition discussion groups and those that were not and this time observe a difference - the children in those HH participating in SFHC's interventions had an improved health status

2003

Aim to address issues relating to malnutrition, food security and gender inequality so introduce:

- Cooking demonstrations so farmers can diversify diet using increased diversity of crops they are producing
- Nutrition and agriculture groups consisting of larger group split into smaller groups of women of child bearing age and men of child bearing age and grandmother and grandfathers.

Bi-annually for approx. 3 years took the height-weight measures of approx. 1000 to 2000 children under 5 years. Compared HH practicing soil improvement technologies and those that were not. Limited difference between the two groups.

Considered investigated other contributing factors

Appendix 3: CNOP-CAM primary data collection activities

Table 4: Interview participants. CNOP-CAM

Interviewee number	Interviewee
Interviewee 1 (3 times)	Member of the PROPAC secretariat, and CNOP-CAM based in Cameroon (1 female)
Interviewee 2	Current President of PROPAC in Chad (1 male)
Interviewee 3	PROPAC Coordinator in Cameroon (1 male)
Interviewee 4 (3 times)	Current president CNOP-CAM (and former President of both PROPAC and PAFO) (1 female)
Interviewee 5	Regional representative of North-West region (1 female)
Interviewee 6	Regional representative of Adamaoua region (1 female)

Table 5: Focus group discussions, CNOP-CAM

Number	Focus group discussion participants
Group 1	Combination of farmers, lead farmers and CNOP-CAM leadership
Group 2	Farmers from cooperative based near Ntui, Central region (1 female, 1 male, 1 young male)
Group 3	Leaders of cooperative based near Ntui, Central Region (3 males, 1 female – President, Treasurer, Head of the Council of Elders, and Head of Solidarity Unit)
Group 4	Farmers from cooperative based near Foubot, Western region (2 male; 1 female)
Group 5	Leaders of the cooperative based near Foubot, Western region (3 males – Chair of the Board of Directors, General Manager, Administrative and Financial Manager)

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