

Supermarket Sovereignty and the Recolonisation of Rural Food Systems: A Rural Sociological Analysis of Chain Stores and Agrarian Displacement in Southern Africa

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Abstract Supermarket expansion in South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia is widely framed as a marker of rural development, yet this paper argues that chain stores fundamentally displace agrarian autonomy and reorganise rural life. The study advances the Retail Recolonisation Thesis, which contends that supermarkets restructure rural food systems through mechanisms that consolidate corporate control, marginalise smallholders, and erode local food knowledges. Using a qualitative, comparative approach grounded in rural sociology and agrarian political economy, the paper draws on secondary literature, empirical case studies, and policy documents to analyse how procurement systems, infrastructural investments, and pricing strategies enable supermarkets to penetrate rural regions. The findings reveal systemic agrarian displacement through procurement exclusion, loss of indigenous food knowledge, nutritional transition towards ultra-processed diets, the reconstitution of rural subjectivities around consumption, and heightened dependency as informal markets collapse. These dynamics demonstrate that supermarket expansion is not a neutral or benevolent development but a rural power project that recentres food governance in corporate hands while weakening agrarian livelihoods, cultural autonomy, and local sovereignty. The paper concludes that reframing supermarketisation as a form of reclamation is essential for understanding its deep social, economic, and epistemic impacts. It calls for policies and grassroots initiatives that rebuild agrarian citizenship and strengthen food sovereignty as foundations for rural resilience.

Keywords: *Rural restructuring, supermarkets, agrarian change, food sovereignty, retail reclamation, Southern Africa*

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, rural Southern Africa has undergone a profound restructuring marked less by agricultural renewal than by the expansion of supermarket chains into spaces historically organised around agrarian rhythms and community-based food systems. Where local markets, informal vendors, and household production historically shaped rural food provisioning, the arrival of Shoprite, Pick n Pay, Choppies, and other large retailers has reconfigured these landscapes, introducing supply chains, consumption norms, and economic actors that were previously absent. This transformation has been widely celebrated in policy and development discourse as a sign of rural progress, evidence that modern retail is bringing efficiency, affordability, and food access to marginalised regions [1]. Beneath the expansion of branded retail, however, lies a deeper sociological

transformation whose implications for rural autonomy and livelihood systems remain insufficiently examined.

The dominant narrative that frames supermarket penetration as synonymous with improved food security reduces rural well-being to metrics of price and availability. Such thinking is embedded in a broader technocratic logic that equates market expansion with development, obscuring the power relations that determine who produces food, who controls distribution, and whose knowledge systems are displaced in the process [2]. In rural sociology, however, food security cannot be divorced from the historical and structural forces that shape rural life. Scholars of agrarian political economy have long shown that transformations in rural food systems reflect broader processes of capitalism, class formation, and spatial governance [3]. Similarly, research on rural restructuring highlights how global retail chains reorganise rural spaces and subjectivities, shifting them from sites of production to sites of consumption [4]. These insights expose a fundamental flaw in the celebratory

discourse surrounding supermarkets: they are not neutral retailers filling gaps in rural markets, but powerful institutions whose expansion carries political, cultural, and ecological consequences.

This paper argues that supermarket expansion in rural Southern Africa represents a form of retail recolonisation, a process through which rural food systems are enclosed, redirected, and subordinated to the imperatives of corporate capital rather than community needs. The Retail Recolonisation Thesis proposed here conceptualises supermarkets as instruments of spatial governance that reshape rurality by marginalising smallholder producers, eroding indigenous foodways, and fostering long-term dependencies on external supply chains. Rather than merely providing access to food, supermarkets restructure the very conditions under which rural communities understand, source, and value food. This shift marks a sociological transformation of rural life: from agrarian livelihoods grounded in production, reciprocity, and ecological embeddedness to consumer identities shaped by market logics, processed foods, and imported cultural norms.

The purpose of this paper is therefore twofold: first, to interrogate the conventional assumption that supermarkets are unequivocal contributors to rural development and food security; and second, to advance a rural sociological analysis demonstrating that supermarket-led modernisation reproduces structural inequalities, undermines autonomy, and transforms rural subjectivities. The analysis draws on comparative case material from South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia, contextualising supermarket expansion within regional histories of dispossession, state-market alliances, and uneven development. In doing so, the paper positions supermarket proliferation as part of a longer trajectory of spatial and economic domination, operating through the soft power of affordability, convenience, and symbolic modernity rather than overt coercion.

The structure of the paper reflects this analytical progression. The theoretical framework section outlines the rural sociology, agrarian political economy, and food sovereignty perspectives that underpin the Retail Recolonisation Thesis. The methodology section details the qualitative, comparative rural analysis used to synthesise existing scholarship and case study evidence. Subsequent empirical sections examine regional supermarket penetration, mechanisms of agrarian displacement, the politics of price and perception, and emerging counter-models of rural food sovereignty. The paper concludes by advocating for a paradigm shift from market-centric understandings of food access to sovereignty-oriented frameworks grounded in justice, autonomy, and rural resilience. This paper contends that supermarket expansion is not simply a market expansion but a political and sociological project that is reshaping the future of rural Southern Africa.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper locates supermarket expansion within broader processes of rural restructuring, global agri-food governance, class dynamics of agrarian change, and struggles for food sovereignty.

Together, these lenses ground the Retail Recolonisation Thesis in the core concerns of rural sociology: how rural spaces are reorganised, which actors gain or lose power, and how everyday rural life is reshaped in the wake of globalising markets.

Rural restructuring theory provides the first anchor. Classic work on rural restructuring examined how agriculture, labour markets, and rural settlements were transformed by global markets, state policy and technological change, leading to de-agrarianisation, multi-activity livelihoods and the commodification of rural life [5]. More recent scholarship, including for South Africa, shows that smallholders are progressively disengaging from farming, not because agriculture has ceased to matter, but because structural conditions make it increasingly unviable relative to precarious wage labour, social grants or informal services [6]. This work challenges romantic images of the rural as agrarian and homogenous, emphasising instead differentiated trajectories in which some households intensify production while others exit farming altogether. In this literature, supermarkets are no longer marginal actors: they are part of the infrastructure through which rural restructuring occurs. Studies on the restructuring of food retail in the global South show that supermarket penetration into small towns and rural regions reorganises local markets, labour opportunities and everyday consumption practices, effectively “re-wiring” rural economies into national and transnational circuits of capital [7,8]. This reinforces the governance role of supermarkets in determining which rural livelihoods remain viable within changing food systems.

At the same time, rural restructuring theory has limitations if treated in purely descriptive terms. Much of this work focuses on occupational shifts and demographic change without fully theorising the corporate food system that underpins them. It is here that food regime theory, particularly McMichael’s account of the “corporate food regime”, becomes essential. Food regime analysis conceptualises historical periods in which specific configurations of states, corporations and agricultural systems organise the global production–distribution–consumption nexus [9,10]. In the current corporate food regime, transnational agribusiness, global retailers and financial actors dominate agri-food markets, relying on long, vertically integrated supply chains and standardised commodities. Recent reformulations emphasise that these regimes are not static structures but evolving geographies that link planetary crises, labour relations and state strategies [11]. This extends the corporate food regime into rural space through centralised sourcing systems, logistics infrastructures, and standardised consumption patterns. . In this process, socially embedded food circuits are progressively replaced by extended corporate-controlled supply chains.”

Yet food regime theory also attracts critique for its tendency toward macro-structural abstraction, sometimes flattening regional and local specificity under the weight of global narratives [12]. To avoid this pitfall, this paper treats food regime theory as a scaffolding rather than a totalising explanation. It uses the regime lens to illuminate how supermarket expansion is historically situated in a corporate food order, but it turns to agrarian political economy and rural sociology to explain the differentiated

impacts on classes of producers and consumers in concrete rural settings.

Agrarian political economy, particularly Bernstein's (2010, 2014) class-analytic approach, offers a third pillar. Bernstein's central question - "who owns what, who does what, who gets what, and what do they do with it?" has become a touchstone for analysing agrarian change. Recent work building on this tradition demonstrates how smallholders at "commodity frontiers" are differentiated into classes of "survivors", petty commodity producers, and emergent capitalist farmers, depending on their access to land, labour, capital and markets [13,14]. In the context of supermarket expansion, agrarian political economy directs attention to how procurement standards, volume requirements, certification regimes, and payment terms systematically exclude most smallholders from formal supply chains in South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia. Those who can align with supermarket demands may become specialised petty commodity producers or contract farmers, but the majority are relegated to residual or informal markets or exit agriculture altogether. In Zambia and Botswana, supermarket supply contracts frequently favour larger commercial producers and processors capable of guaranteeing year-round volumes, thereby excluding smaller seasonal producers from formal retail participation. Supermarkets thus sharpen class differentiation in the countryside by selectively incorporating better-resourced farmers while deepening the marginalisation of "survivors" who lack the means to comply. From this perspective, the Retail Recolonisation Thesis emphasises that supermarkets do not simply "fail" to include smallholders; they participate in an active process of agrarian class restructuring that channels value upward and outward.

However, agrarian political economy has itself been criticised for privileging production relations at the expense of cultural and epistemic dimensions of food systems. It says relatively less about how supermarket-driven dietary transitions, food symbolism and everyday consumption reshape rural identities and social relations. To examine this gap, the paper combines agrarian political economy with food sovereignty perspectives that foreground questions of power, culture and rights in food systems.

Food sovereignty enters the framework as a counter-theory to technocratic food security and as a normative horizon for evaluating supermarket expansion. Originating in peasant and indigenous movements and now elaborated in scholarly work, food sovereignty asserts the right of peoples to define their own food and agricultural systems, prioritising local control, ecological sustainability and cultural appropriateness over corporate profit and trade liberalisation [15,16]. Recent scholarship has expanded this agenda by highlighting indigenous food systems and the ways in which sovereignty involves not only land and resources but also the protection of culinary knowledge and relational ethics of care [17]. In Africa, regional coalitions such as the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) and the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign have explicitly targeted the corporate food system, arguing that supermarket-dominated regimes deepen ecological crises, health inequalities and social injustice [18,19].

Food sovereignty is not without tensions, particularly where local food systems themselves reproduce inequalities or where small-scale initiatives struggle to confront transnational retail power. Nevertheless, the framework remains analytically valuable because it foregrounds autonomy, ecological justice, and community control over food systems in ways that conventional food security approaches often neglect,

Normatively, it provides a yardstick against which the Retail Recolonisation Thesis can be assessed: a rural food system is recolonised to the extent that communities lose meaningful control over what is produced, how it is produced, and how it circulates. In this paper, food sovereignty functions both analytically and normatively by exposing how supermarket-centred food systems prioritise price and availability over autonomy, cultural continuity, and ecological resilience. By juxtaposing rural restructuring theory, food regime analysis, agrarian political economy and food sovereignty, the theoretical framework conceptualises supermarkets as key agents in a corporate food order that is materially embedded in local class structures and symbolically inscribed in rural identities. The Retail Recolonisation Thesis emerges at this intersection: it names the process whereby chain stores in South Africa, Botswana and Zambia reorganise rural food systems, consolidate agrarian inequalities and reconstitute rural subjectivities around consumption, while eroding the conditions for food sovereignty and agrarian autonomy.

3. Methodology

This study uses a comparative rural sociology methodology to analyse how supermarket expansion restructures rural food systems in South Africa, Botswana and Zambia. Comparative rural sociology is well suited to examining transformations in rural livelihoods, class relations, and spatial governance across historically differentiated political economies. [6]. The approach enables the identification of patterns of similarity and divergence in the evolution of supermarket penetration, while situating these processes within the broader context of agrarian change and rural restructuring. The primary units of analysis are rural food environments, understood as the combined social, economic and infrastructural contexts through which rural residents access, produce and consume food. These environments encompass local markets, informal vendors, smallholder production systems, corporate retail outlets and the regulatory frameworks that shape their interaction. The analysis draws on peer-reviewed agrarian and rural sociology scholarship, supermarket expansion case studies, food environment research, and regional policy documents. These materials provide insights into procurement systems, market restructuring, rural livelihoods, dietary transitions and regulatory debates in each country [8,20].

Data were analysed using a thematic rural sociological strategy guided by the Retail Recolonisation Thesis. Themes were derived both deductively, based on theoretical concerns such as rural restructuring, class differentiation and food sovereignty, and inductively, from patterns that emerged across the empirical literature. This dual analytical strategy strengthened interpretive depth by

linking conceptual frameworks with recurring empirical patterns across the selected regional contexts [14]. Themes included procurement exclusion, knowledge erosion, consumption norms, price politics and the transformation of rural subjectivities. The comparative secondary-analysis design was adopted because supermarket expansion across Southern Africa remains unevenly documented through fragmented policy studies, food environment research, and agrarian scholarship. Rather than pursuing statistical generalisation, the study seeks analytical generalisation by identifying recurring structural patterns across South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia. Comparative interpretation focused on convergences in procurement systems, infrastructural expansion, consumer transitions, and food governance arrangements across the three national settings. The methodological objective was therefore explanatory and theory-building rather than predictive, allowing the Retail Recolonisation Thesis to emerge through iterative engagement between empirical evidence and conceptual interpretation. Country cases were selected because they represent distinct but interconnected trajectories of supermarket expansion within Southern Africa's uneven agrarian and retail restructuring processes. A positionality statement is necessary given the contested nature of food system research in post-colonial contexts. As a study based on secondary analysis, the research acknowledges that knowledge about rural food systems is shaped by uneven power relations in academic publishing, donor priorities and state narratives. Following Brant et al. (2023), the methodology recognises the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and seeks to interpret rural transformations without reproducing colonial framings that pathologise informal markets or idealise corporate modernity. The commitment to food sovereignty therefore extends to epistemic practice: valuing local agrarian histories, acknowledging rural agency and resisting narratives that present supermarket expansion as inevitable or universally beneficial.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Regional Dynamics of Chain Store Penetration (South Africa, Botswana, Zambia)

The regional dynamics of supermarket penetration in South Africa, Botswana and Zambia reveal not a neutral diffusion of retail modernity but a state-enabled restructuring of rural food systems that progressively binds rural livelihoods to corporate value chains. Temporally, the sequence is clear. Supermarkets consolidated first in South Africa's urban and suburban markets from the late 1980s, then expanded into townships, secondary cities and, more recently, peri-urban and rural small towns [1,21]. This urban-to-rural "retail cascade" provided the template for regional expansion into Botswana and Zambia, where South African chains such as Shoprite and Pick n Pay, and regional players such as Choppies and Sefalana, rolled out stores along national corridors of growth and state-led development zones

[7,22]. Although the pace and form of this penetration differ, a common pattern emerges: supermarkets follow, and then accelerate, a reorientation of food systems away from localised agrarian circuits toward formalised, centralised distribution networks.

In South Africa, the depth of supermarket penetration reflects the country's relatively early liberalisation of trade, strong financial markets and investment in commercial infrastructure. The Competition Commission's Grocery Retail Market Inquiry documents how the major supermarket chains came to dominate the grocery retail sector, with a particularly dense footprint in urban and peri-urban nodes that eventually spilt into smaller towns and former homeland regions [23]. Battersby [24] shows that shopping mall and supermarket development has been central to the state-capital project of "regenerating" township and small-town economies, often at the expense of informal traders and small independent retailers. This logic extends into rural service centres, where malls anchored by supermarkets become new hubs of consumption, credit and governance. Charlton [25] notes that supermarkets increasingly function as quasi-public spaces in these settlements, organising mobility, social interaction, and even perceptions of safety around the rhythms of retail. The temporal sequencing in South Africa, therefore, reflects a deliberate alignment between state spatial planning, mall developers, and retail corporations, with supermarkets positioned as key vehicles of post-apartheid modernisation, including in rural and former "homeland" areas. This demonstrates how retail expansion became embedded within post-apartheid spatial restructuring.

By contrast, in Botswana, supermarket penetration has been more explicitly bound up with state-led development strategies and the formalisation of trade. Das Nair and Chisoro-Dube [7] show how the rise of Choppies and the transformation of Sefalana from wholesaler to retail chain have been closely aligned with national industrial policy, investment in road networks and support for formal retail as a source of non-mining growth. The construction of malls and shopping centres in district capitals and larger rural towns has created formalised retail nodes that draw in customers from extensive rural hinterlands. While this has improved access to a wider variety of packaged foods and household goods, it has also intensified competition with village-based general dealers and informal traders. The African Climate Foundation's position paper on supermarketisation highlights that Botswana's regional chains wield significant buyer power and rely heavily on centralised procurement and distribution systems, often based in South Africa, which limits the scope for local small-scale producers and processors to participate [26]. In this context, the state's support for supermarketisation as a modernisation strategy effectively outsources food system governance to corporate actors, who then determine what appears on rural shelves and at what prices. Here, supermarketisation became closely tied to state-led formalisation strategies.

In Zambia, the trajectory has been more uneven but equally revealing of supermarketisation as a form of spatial governance. Early studies focused on urban centres such as Lusaka and the Copperbelt, where supermarkets

clustered around affluent and middle-class neighbourhoods [27]. More recent work documents a rapid increase in supermarkets compared to public markets in Lusaka between 2004 and 2020, highlighting the uneven development of the food retail environment and its implications for food access [28]. Ziba and Phiri [22] show that the expansion of regional supermarket chains into Zambia has not translated into broad-based local supplier participation; instead, supermarkets source largely from large processors or import from South Africa, while small processors face structural and strategic barriers to entry into these value chains. Although much of this literature focuses on urban areas, the spatial logic has rural implications: supermarkets in district towns and mining centres become key gateways through which rural consumers access formal food retail and through which rural producers must pass if they wish to supply formal markets. The Zambian case illustrates the corridor-based unevenness of retail penetration.

Across all three countries, state–capital alliances are central to explaining how and why supermarkets penetrate beyond major cities. Competition policy, investment frameworks and land-use planning collectively create enabling environments for large-format retail. In South Africa, the Competition Commission has documented how long-term exclusive lease agreements between supermarkets and mall landlords locked out competing retailers and limited alternative models and practices, thereby affecting rural and small-town retail landscapes [23]. The Tribunal’s 2020 consent agreement with Shoprite, which required the phasing out of exclusivity clauses, is indicative of the extent to which supermarkets had been allowed to shape local retail ecologies through contractual control over space [29]. The Commission’s 2025–2030 Strategic Plan and recent newsletters explicitly recognise the need to curb buyer power and open space for small and historically disadvantaged suppliers and retailers, including in township and rural grocery value chains [23]. These policy moves implicitly acknowledge that supermarkets have functioned as governance nodes, regulating entry, competition, and even the viability of alternative rural food outlets.

Rural infrastructural change has both followed and facilitated this expansion. Investments in road networks, electrification, telecommunications and cold chain infrastructure have made it feasible for supermarkets to reach smaller towns and rural growth points, while public incentives for mall development have created concentrated retail sites that draw in rural consumers [30]. In South Africa, research on the informal food economy shows that where malls and supermarkets appear, they alter pedestrian flows, taxi routes and the spatial logics of everyday provisioning, often marginalising traditional street traders and spaza shops [24,31]. In Botswana, mall-based supermarkets have become anchors of new commercial districts that reorient trade away from older village markets and bus ranks, while in Zambia the concentration of supermarkets along major transport corridors and in mining towns creates new hierarchies of access between rural areas with direct physical links to these nodes and those without [22,32]. These infrastructural shifts ensure that supermarkets are not simply one retailer among many, but key arbiters of where and how rural people can engage with

the formal food economy.

The penetration logics differ in emphasis but converge in effect. In South Africa, supermarket expansion has largely followed an “urban spillover” model, extending outwards from metropolitan cores into townships, secondary cities and rural service centres. In Botswana, a more explicitly state-led development model has used supermarkets and malls to signal modernity and attract investment to district centres and border towns. In Zambia, supermarkets have initially clustered around mining areas and urban growth poles, later extending into smaller towns as part of broader processes of commercialisation and regional integration. Across these trajectories, Crush et al.

[33] are right to caution against the idea of a uniform “supermarket revolution”; instead, supermarketisation evolves through country-specific coalitions of state, capital and local elites, with highly uneven effects on informal traders, smallholders and low-income consumers. What unites these cases is that at no point is supermarket expansion a purely market-driven phenomenon. It is nurtured by permissive regulatory regimes, public infrastructural investment, municipal land-use decisions and, in some instances, active fiscal incentives.

Seen from this perspective, supermarkets in South Africa, Botswana and Zambia function as state-enabled rural governance technologies. They govern access to food by determining product assortments, price structures and credit offers; they govern space by shaping where retail activity is concentrated and which actors are excluded from malls and prime locations; and they govern rural livelihoods by selectively integrating some producers into formal value chains while rendering others redundant. Contemporary African scholarship on food systems stresses that these processes cannot be reduced to consumer choice or firm strategy; they are deeply political reorganisations of rural life [26,32]. In advancing the Retail Recolonisation Thesis, this paper argues that supermarket penetration in these three countries represents not only a diffusion of modern retail but a reconfiguration of rural power relations in which the state, through its regulatory and infrastructural choices, actively delegates key dimensions of food system governance to corporate actors.

4.2. Mechanisms of Agrarian Displacement

Mechanisms of agrarian displacement in South Africa, Botswana and Zambia are neither accidental nor simply the by-product of consumer choice. They are structured effects of how supermarkets are designed to operate within a corporate food regime and how states regulate, or fail to regulate, their power. The Retail Recolonisation Thesis is best demonstrated by unpacking the concrete mechanisms through which chain stores displace agrarian livelihoods, erode food cultures, and manufacture long-run dependency.

The first mechanism is procurement exclusion. Supermarkets in Southern Africa rely on highly centralised sourcing systems, with dedicated distribution centres, preferred supplier lists and tight logistics schedules that reward volume, consistency and standardisation. Evidence from regional supermarket chains shows that procurement is increasingly handled through regional hubs and head offices, often located in

South Africa, which then supply stores in Botswana, Zambia and beyond [7,34]. In practice, smallholders

frequently struggle to meet supermarket requirements relating to refrigeration, transport scheduling, product uniformity, and delayed payment cycles, even where they remain competitive within local informal markets. Global and regional work on voluntary standards such as GlobalGAP has repeatedly shown that compliance is strongly correlated with farm size, access to credit, and technical support, creating a “capital threshold” above which supplying supermarkets becomes feasible and below which it is prohibitive [35,36]. A recent review of agriproduct supply to supermarkets in Africa and Asia confirms that while processed foods penetrated supermarket shelves early, fresh fruit and vegetables from small-scale producers face persistent obstacles, including demanding private standards, payment delays and high rejection rates [37]. In South Africa, this dynamic is compounded by racialised histories of land and capital accumulation, meaning that those who can “graduate” into supermarket supply are often already better-resourced commercial or emergent farmers, while black smallholders remain confined to informal or residual markets [6,38]. Procurement exclusion thus functions as a selection device: supermarkets actively curate a narrow stratum of agrarian suppliers while structurally disqualifying the majority. This pattern reflects wider agrarian restructuring processes in which market integration selectively incorporates producers with capital, infrastructure, and institutional support while marginalising survivalist producers and informal agrarian actors [85]. This dynamic consolidates agrarian differentiation in favour of capitalised producers and corporate processors.”

The second mechanism is knowledge erosion and what we might call culinary epistemicide. Supermarket aisles present a highly curated, branded and standardised foodscape that privileges refined staples, industrially processed foods and a narrow range of vegetables and animal products. Products such as imported breakfast cereals, processed snacks, and refined grain products increasingly occupy shelf space previously associated with locally processed grains, legumes, and indigenous vegetables. Across Africa, indigenous crops such as sorghum, millet, African leafy vegetables and bambara groundnut have been documented as nutritionally dense, climate-resilient and culturally embedded, yet they remain marginal in formal retail and are often replaced by maize, wheat and rice-based products [39,40]. In South Africa, work on indigenous food crops and traditional African grains shows that supermarketisation has coincided with declining use of coarse grains and wild vegetables, partly because these foods are absent from mainstream retail and partly because they are increasingly perceived as “backward” or labour-intensive compared to ready-to-cook industrial foods [41,42]. In many rural households, younger generations increasingly associate sorghum, millet, and traditional leafy vegetables with poverty or backwardness, while packaged supermarket foods acquire symbolic associations with convenience and social mobility. Ethnographic work in Mpondoland, for example, documents how sorghum has been “almost completely abandoned” in favour of maize, with elders lamenting the

loss of knowledge about sorghum-based dishes and their ceremonial significance [43]. International reviews on indigenous food systems warn that as supermarket logics spread, culinary knowledges – recipes, preservation techniques, seed selection, seasonal rituals are displaced by corporate food cultures and homogenised diets [35,44]. African scholars increasingly frame this as a form of epistemic dispossession: when supermarkets become the default interface between rural communities and food, they overwrite plural, locally adapted food epistemologies with a narrow, commodified canon of what counts as “proper food” [38,45]. The result is culinary epistemicide: not only do traditional foods become devalued, but the very knowledge systems that sustained them are rendered obsolete. Recent scholarship further demonstrates that the erosion of indigenous food systems simultaneously weakens intergenerational ecological knowledge, local seed diversity, and culturally embedded nutritional practices in rural communities [86].

The third mechanism is the rural nutrition transition, which can be understood as “nutritional colonialism.” Nutrition transition research in Southern Africa has shown a clear shift from traditional, fibre- and micronutrient-rich diets toward energy-dense, ultra-processed foods high in sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats, with concomitant rises in obesity, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes [46,47]. Popkin’s recent work describes a new stage of nutrition transition dominated by ultra-processed foods, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where corporate food systems expand more rapidly than regulatory frameworks [48,49]. Reardon and colleagues argue that the “processed food revolution” in African food systems is closely tied to supermarket expansion, as formal retailers provide key distribution channels for packaged snacks, sugary beverages and instant foods [50]. In South Africa, a desktop review of dietary intake shows that even remote rural households increasingly purchase processed foods from formal retailers as subsistence agriculture erodes, with supermarkets playing a pivotal role in fuelling this transition [51]. FAO’s [52] regional overview for Africa similarly notes that rural populations in countries such as South Africa and Zambia face a “double burden” of malnutrition, where persistent undernutrition coexists with rapidly rising diet-related NCDs in the same households. Instead, shelf space is increasingly dominated by instant noodles, sugary beverages, refined maize products, processed snacks, and imported packaged foods that progressively displace locally prepared staples. This dynamic reflects a form of nutritional colonialism in which rural diets are reorganised around the surplus products of the corporate food regime. This shift is especially visible among younger rural consumers whose dietary patterns increasingly revolve around packaged convenience foods purchased during periodic supermarket shopping trips

The fourth mechanism concerns the de-agrarianisation of rural subjectivities. Rural restructuring research has documented a long-term shift away from farming as the primary livelihood and identity in many parts of South Africa, with smallholders increasingly combining social grants, wage work and petty trade while treating agriculture as residual or symbolic [5,6]. Supermarkets intensify this trend by repositioning rural residents

primarily as consumers rather than producers. The act of going to the mall or supermarket becomes a key marker of modernity and belonging, and household food practices increasingly centre on shopping trips rather than cultivation, foraging or reciprocal exchange. In many rural small towns, supermarket shopping increasingly functions as a performative social activity associated with aspiration, cleanliness, status, and participation in modern consumer life. Moseley's [38] work on decolonising African agriculture illustrates how urban and peri-urban African consumers attach status to imported and refined foods because they are faster to prepare and culturally coded as "modern," even when they are nutritionally inferior and ecologically riskier than local staples. This logic is equally evident in rural small towns, where supermarket-branded bread, rice and instant noodles displace labour-intensive home-cooked grains and stews. Store-branded bread, packaged snacks, instant meals, and processed beverages frequently become symbols of upward mobility despite their weaker nutritional and ecological foundations. As supermarkets become the main food interface, rural subjectivities are reconstituted around purchasing power, creditworthiness and brand affiliation. Communal food practices – seed sharing, communal grinding mills, collective brewing, and reciprocal gifts of grain – become less central to social life. African debates on food sovereignty warn that this redefinition of rural citizens as consumers undermines the political agency embedded in agrarian citizenship, where claims to land, water and seed were historically tied to production and stewardship rather than consumption alone [40]. The Retail Recolonisation Thesis therefore captures both material dispossession and the restructuring of rural aspirations around consumer modernity

The fifth mechanism is market capture and dependency formation. Supermarkets rarely enter rural markets as neutral competitors. Evidence from South Africa shows that when malls and supermarkets appear in townships and small towns, they reconfigure pedestrian flows, taxi routes and retail ecologies in ways that systematically disadvantage informal traders and small shops [24,31]. Policy briefs from the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security note that state regulation of informal trade has been largely restrictive, while formal retail has benefited from planning approvals, infrastructural investment and, in some cases, exclusive lease arrangements [53]. Wegerif's [54] work on the COVID-19 crisis in South Africa demonstrates how supermarkets were quickly recognised as "essential services" and allowed to operate, while informal traders – who supply 40–50 per cent of food in some contexts were initially shut down, highlighting institutionalised bias in favour of corporate food channels. Hungry Cities research on Cape Town likewise shows that small vendors play a critical role in bulk-breaking, proximity and flexible credit, yet are crowded out when supermarket-linked malls dominate strategic sites [55]. Recent work on food retail, markets and informality in Africa argues that supermarkets exercise "territorial" control over prime locations and negotiate favourable regulatory treatment, while territorial food marketers in public markets face infrastructural neglect and harassment [56]. As supermarkets consolidate market share, they can engage in aggressive discounting

on staple or "loss leader" items to draw customers away from smaller competitors, later recouping margins through higher prices and exclusive product offerings. Over time, rural consumers lose fallback options: where spaza shops, hawkers and small grocers once provided alternatives, a single supermarket or small cluster of chains may become the only viable source of many foods. Termeer and colleagues stress that informal midstream actors have their own sophisticated governance arrangements and resilience contributions, yet these are often undermined by policies and investments that prioritise formal value chains [57]. In agrarian terms, this is market recolonisation: supermarkets capture territorial food economies and render rural households dependent on corporate channels whose pricing, sourcing and product decisions are made far from the communities they affect.

As a combination, these mechanisms reveal how supermarket expansion restructures rural food systems through intertwined material, cultural, and political forms of governance. It is a state-enabled project that restructures agrarian classes, erases food knowledges, reshapes bodies and desires, and encloses rural food markets under corporate control. This is precisely what the Retail Recolonisation Thesis seeks to name: a contemporary mode of recolonising rural food systems, less through overt dispossession and more through the everyday infrastructures of retail, logistics and branding.

4.3. Rural Price Politics, Perception, and Consumer Modernity

Price in rural supermarket economies is never just a number on a shelf; it is a technology of rule. In South Africa, Botswana and Zambia, chain stores routinely present low prices and promotions as benevolent interventions on behalf of "the poor consumer," especially in the face of fuel shocks and food inflation. Nevertheless, competition inquiries and township retail studies show that "affordability" is often a strategic device to secure market share, weaken competitors and normalise corporate control over local food spaces [23,58]. Recent work on township pricing strategies in South Africa confirms that larger retailers and better-capitalised grocery businesses are able to deploy complex pricing menus as loss leaders, selective discounting, loyalty schemes that smaller rivals cannot match, reconfiguring consumer expectations around what counts as a "reasonable" price while entrenching structural inequalities in the retail field [59]. Affordability therefore functions as a governance mechanism that integrates rural consumers into increasingly concentrated retail systems. Temporary promotional pricing on staple foods such as maize meal, bread, cooking oil, and rice often draws consumers away from informal traders who cannot absorb comparable pricing pressures.

The framing of supermarkets as "guardians of the poor" is particularly visible in public discourse on the current food crisis. Analyses of the cost-of-living squeeze in South Africa emphasise how rising transport and food prices hit low-income households hardest, yet policy responses overwhelmingly treat chain retailers as partners in "keeping prices down," rather than as actors whose pricing power needs to be structurally constrained [60]. At

the same time, industry reviews underline that four supermarket groups control over 70% of the formal grocery market nationally, with concentration often even higher at the local level, including in rural towns [61]. The African Climate Foundation's analysis of "supermarketisation" across the continent argues that this model positions supermarkets as lead firms in key food value chains, with significant influence over farm-gate prices, processing margins and retail mark-ups [26]. In Botswana and Zambia, South African and regional chains occupy similarly dominant positions in district centres, yet their rhetoric of affordable modern food obscures long-run dependency on imported or centrally sourced goods whose prices are highly sensitive to external shocks. What appears as cheap food today is, therefore, better understood as an entry tariff into a tightly governed corporate food regime.

If price is one axis of governance, aesthetics is another. Rural and small-town supermarkets in South Africa, Botswana and Zambia are not merely places of purchase; they are stages on which "rural aspirational modernity" is performed. Studies of South African malls and supermarkets show that tiled floors, branded shelves, climate control, and security technologies produce a sensory environment sharply differentiated from open markets and informal stalls, inviting consumers to experience retail space as clean, safe, and respectable [24,62]. Recent work on township shopping centres underscores how malls function as symbols of economic progress and social uplift, with black working- and middle-class consumers reading their presence as evidence that they have finally been recognised by capital and the state Geoscope South Africa, 2023; [63]. Scholarship on emerging African small towns shows similar dynamics: new retail complexes become focal points of territorial identity and governance, drawing in rural residents from surrounding hinterlands and subtly redefining what it means to "belong" to a modern town [64]. When supermarkets anchor these developments, they are not only selling food; they are selling an aesthetic of arrival into modernity that reorients rural imaginaries away from fields and open markets towards aisles and trolleys. In many small towns, shopping malls increasingly function as aspirational public spaces where branded consumption becomes associated with dignity, safety, and middle-class belonging.

Within these retailscapes, the illusion of choice is central. Walking into a supermarket in a district town in Zambia or Botswana, a rural consumer may encounter dozens of brands of maize meal, cooking oil, or biscuits, giving the impression of abundant options and competitive markets. Yet recent analyses of global and South African food systems highlight that much of this variety is superficial: a small number of manufacturers and retailer-owned brands dominate shelf space, while upstream supply chains are controlled by a handful of transnational agrifood corporations [32,65]. Competition and supply chain studies in South Africa confirm that concentrated buyer power allows supermarkets to determine which brands and products survive on the shelf, often excluding smaller local producers even when their products are popular or culturally resonant [23,61]. African Climate Foundation [26] argues that supermarketisation thus

replaces plural local food economies with curated oligopolies packaged as "everyday low prices" and endless choice. Retail-led modernity therefore operates through the appearance of choice while deeper structures of ownership and sourcing remain highly concentrated. This concentration of ownership within formally diversified retail environments reinforces the asymmetrical power of dominant food corporations over pricing structures, shelf access, and consumer behaviour across developing food systems [87].

Consumption itself becomes a marker of belonging and a vehicle of dependency. Ethnographic work on South African foodways reveals that under-resourced, "poor" households often value supermarkets not only for occasional price advantages but for the social experience of shopping, the predictability of product quality and the symbolic association with being a "proper" consumer [66]. Township consumer research finds that trust, perceived value, and dignity in how customers are treated weigh heavily in shopping decisions, with branded retailers and well-presented stores often perceived as more respectful and reliable than cramped or precarious informal outlets [67,68]. As supermarkets extend from townships into small towns and rural service centres, these logics diffuse outward: to buy from the supermarket is to inhabit a recognised position in the national consumer public, even if one's income is precarious and subject to inflationary erosion. At the same time, trend analyses of the food retail sector caution that supply chain disruptions, currency volatility, and global price shocks are rendering supermarket food increasingly unaffordable for many low-income households, especially in rural and peri-urban areas [32,69]. The very institutions that confer a fragile sense of modern belonging thus become sites of acute vulnerability when prices spike or credit dries up.

Table 1. Mechanisms of Retail Recolonisation and Rural Consequences

Mechanism	Operational Logic	Rural Consequence
Procurement exclusion	Centralised sourcing systems Volume requirements Compliance standards	Smallholder marginalisation Exclusion from formal value chains
Culinary epistemicide	Standardised retail foodscapes Displacement of indigenous food systems	Loss of indigenous food knowledge Erosion of local food cultures
Nutritional colonialism	Penetration of ultra-processed Industrial food products into rural diets	Diet-related disease transition Weakening of traditional nutritional systems
Market capture	√ Retail concentration, √ Mall dominance, Suppression of informal food economies	√ Dependency on corporate food systems √ Erosion of alternative food channels
Consumer modernity	Retail aesthetics and branding, Aspirational consumption cultures	Reconstitution of rural subjectivities around consumption rather than production

[Source: Author created]

Seen through a rural sociology lens, then, supermarket price politics, aesthetics, and brand strategies are not peripheral to agrarian displacement; they are constitutive of it. Affordability is wielded to dissolve alternative retail ecologies, supermarket aesthetics recode rural identities around aspirational consumption, the illusion of choice

masks underlying oligopoly, and consumption itself becomes the primary route to social recognition. Together, these dynamics deepen the recolonisation of rural food systems: rural residents are invited into a modern consumer citizenship that is structurally dependent on distant corporations and volatile global markets, while the material and symbolic bases of agrarian citizenship – with its claims to land, labour and local food sovereignty – are steadily eroded.

4.4. Counter-Models of Rural Food Sovereignty

Counter-models of rural food sovereignty in South Africa, Zimbabwe and across the region do not emerge in a vacuum; they are rooted in long-standing practices of communal survival and in newer agroecological and political projects that explicitly contest the supermarket- and input-industry model of food provision. Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate alternative pathways through which rural food systems can remain grounded in reciprocity, production, and collective stewardship rather than fragile consumer dependence.

The Zunde raMambo system in Zimbabwe is a particularly important starting point. Studies from the Zambezi Valley show how Zunde raMambo, *nimbe* (collective work parties), and share-rearing arrangements operate as traditional institutions that pool labour, land and grain for communal granaries managed under chiefly authority, providing a buffer against droughts and floods [70]. Recent rural resilience scholarship highlights Zunde raMambo as a living illustration of “collective survival during calamities,” in which vulnerability is dealt with through social obligation and shared stocks rather than through individual purchasing power [71]. In contrast to supermarketised safety nets, which hinge on cash and supply chains, the Zunde model reaffirms agrarian citizenship: membership in the community carries rights to grain in times of crisis alongside duties to contribute labour and produce in good times. The logic here is sovereignty through shared production and storage, not through market access. During drought periods, communal grain reserves frequently provide emergency food support to vulnerable households without requiring dependence on volatile retail pricing systems. From a rural sociology perspective, this is a radically different way of governing food security, one that resists reducing rural residents to price-sensitive consumers and instead positions them as co-stewards of communal surpluses.

Agroecology and farmer field schools (FFS) represent a second family of counter-models, particularly salient in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi. Reviews of agroecological transitions in South Africa document a growing constellation of farmer groups, NGOs, and faith-based organisations experimenting with soil-building practices, diversified cropping, low external-input systems, and farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange [72,73]. A recent meta-analysis commissioned by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) finds that agroecological practices across several African countries improve yields, stabilise production under climate stress, and strengthen local control over resources, especially where they are embedded in collective structures such as

farmer associations and producer cooperatives [74]. Emerging work on farmer field schools in South African municipalities shows that experiential learning platforms can reshape farmers’ climate risk perceptions and capacities, fostering confidence in low-input, locally adapted livestock and cropping systems rather than in imported technology bundles [75]. These initiatives are not simply agronomic alternatives; they are pedagogical spaces in which agrarian citizenship is rehearsed through shared experimentation, horizontal knowledge exchange, and joint decision-making over land and water. They directly counter the supermarket script in which food knowledge(s) and choices are externalised to corporate buyers and nutrition labels.

Seed-sovereignty movements deepen this counter-politics by contesting corporate control over the genetic basis of food systems. Recent African Climate Foundation work on indigenous foodways notes that networks such as AFSA and the Seed and Knowledge Initiative are central to defending communities’ rights “to produce healthy, culturally appropriate food through ecologically sound and sustainable methods” [76], and to maintain their own seed systems. Legal and political struggles reflect this shift. In 2025, Kenyan smallholder farmers secured a landmark High Court ruling striking down provisions of the Seed and Plant Varieties Act that criminalised saving and sharing uncertified seed, a victory celebrated as a step toward food sovereignty and against agribusiness monopolies [77,78]. While the case is Kenyan, it articulates the same principles at stake in Southern Africa: that the right to save, exchange, and adapt seed is foundational to rural autonomy. Seed-sovereignty activism thus pushes beyond technical debates on varietal performance; it reclaims seed as a site of political and cultural belonging, in stark contrast to supermarket regimes where seed choices are invisible and entirely upstream of the rural consumer.

Local market cooperatives and territorial markets provide a fourth set of counter-models, particularly visible in the growing recognition of “territorial markets” across the continent. A 2025 Pan-African policy review emphasises that territorially rooted markets – ranging from public markets to cooperative buying groups and short supply chains play crucial economic, social, and cultural roles, often offering the most remunerative and accessible outlets for smallholder farmers [79]. These markets are governed through horizontal arrangements among traders, producers, and consumers, and they typically revolve around regionally adapted staples, fresh produce, and artisanal processing rather than long-distance, highly standardised products [76]. Compared with supermarket platforms, territorial markets keep value circulation and decision-making power closer to rural communities; they enable forms of agrarian citizenship in which farmers and traders negotiate prices, quality, and seasonality face-to-face, and in which local authorities can regulate with a view to public good rather than shareholder value. In this sense, local market cooperatives and strengthened public markets directly contest the retail recolonisation of rural food economies by recentring food governance in place-bound institutions.

Finally, in South Africa and the wider region, homestead food gardens and small livestock systems embody everyday, often feminised, counter-practices that

sustain rural food sovereignty at the micro scale. Recent quantitative work in Limpopo Province shows that home gardens make a significant contribution to household food security, dietary diversity, and income smoothing, especially for low-income rural households [80]. Complementary studies emphasise that homestead gardens are frequently combined with small livestock chickens, goats, and pigs, forming diversified livelihood portfolios that reduce dependence on purchased food and stabilise access during shocks [81,82]. Shiba et al. [83] find that agricultural households in rural South Africa exhibit different expenditure patterns and vulnerability profiles from non-agricultural households, underlining that even small-scale production can dampen the full exposure to volatile food prices that non-producers face. Although home gardens and small stock rarely feature in formal supermarket narratives of development, rural sociology increasingly recognises them as critical infrastructures of resilience, especially for women, older people, and social grant recipients. They embody agrarian citizenship at the household and neighbourhood levels, where rights and responsibilities are exercised through labour on land, care for animals, and sharing of surplus produce with kin and neighbours.

Across these examples, counter-models of rural food sovereignty do not simply exist alongside supermarket expansion; they actively contest the supermarket-imposed reduction of rural people to consumers. Zunde raMambo reasserts communal provisioning; agroecology and field schools rebuild producer knowledge and collective agency; seed movements reclaim control over the genetic commons; territorial markets re-embed food economies in local social relations; and homestead gardens and small livestock craft everyday forms of autonomy. Together, they sketch decolonial rural futures in which agrarian citizenship rather than consumer modernity anchors rural life, and in which food systems are governed by those who grow, prepare, and eat food, not solely by those who retail it.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that supermarket expansion in South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia does not operate as a neutral market evolution but rather as a structural reorganisation of rural life that closely aligns with the dynamics theorised in rural restructuring, agrarian political economy, and food regime theory. The rural transformations observed across these contexts confirm that supermarkets function as state-enabled governance mechanisms that reshape identities, reconfigure agrarian livelihoods, and reorder the spatial and cultural foundations of rural food systems. This cumulative evidence strengthens the Retail Recolonisation Thesis by showing that chain stores recolonise rural economies through mechanisms that are material, epistemic, and symbolic.

The interplay between rural restructuring and corporate food regime dynamics is critical for understanding how supermarkets achieve deep penetration into rural societies. Rural restructuring theory helps us understand how small towns and rural service centres are transformed through infrastructure investment, labour shifts, and the decline of local markets, thereby creating fertile ground for retail

consolidation. However, as recent work on African food systems stresses, these shifts cannot be separated from the global consolidation of vertically integrated supply chains dominated by transnational agri-food firms [32]. The corporate food regime embeds rural spaces within long, centralised procurement networks that privilege efficiency and standardisation over embeddedness and diversity. In this configuration, supermarkets become the local expression of a distant regime that determines what is grown, how it is transported, and what rural households are expected to consume.

Agrarian political economy sharpens this analysis by exposing the class-differentiating effects of supermarket procurement. Evidence from across Southern Africa shows that supermarkets integrate only a narrow segment of capitalised smallholders or emerging commercial farmers, while excluding most producers based on volume, certification, or logistical requirements [37]. This selective incorporation intensifies pre-existing inequalities linked to land, credit, and extension support. In South Africa, where agrarian structure remains profoundly shaped by racialised dispossession, supermarket procurement intersects with historical capital distribution to reproduce a bifurcated countryside: one compatible with corporate value chains and one rendered invisible to them [6]. These patterns confirm Bernstein's [84] observation that agrarian change under capitalism consolidates class differentiation by rewarding those who can "reproduce their conditions of production" under new pressures while forcing others into survivalist or informal strategies. Supermarket expansion is thus not merely a retail shift; it becomes a mechanism of class restructuring embedded in a broader apparatus of market power.

These dynamics reveal that supermarket expansion reorganises rurality through intertwined material, epistemic, and symbolic forms of governance. The displacement of indigenous food knowledge, culinary practices, and seed systems, as this paper terms it, culinary epistemicide, signals a profound erosion of the cultural infrastructures that sustain agrarian citizenship. Contemporary African scholarship argues that food sovereignty is not simply about local production but about maintaining the epistemic and relational worlds through which communities understand food, land, and survival [17]. In South Africa and Zimbabwe, the retreat of traditional grains and wild foods has less to do with preference and more to do with their absence from formal retail shelves and the social devaluation of local cuisines under supermarket modernity [38]. Supermarket-driven foodscapes promote a homogenised dietary canon that redefines what counts as nutritious, convenient, or respectable, often undermining long-standing rural food epistemologies. Studies on global food transitions similarly observe that corporate retail systems standardise dietary preferences by privileging industrial food cultures over territorially rooted food practices and local nutritional ecologies [88]. This epistemic narrowing further entrenches dependency by framing supermarket foods as synonymous with modern living, while relegating agrarian foodways to the past.

Supermarket expansion restructures not only food access but also the social meaning of rural belonging. Rural identities increasingly become organised around

consumption, purchasing power, and incorporation into corporate retail systems rather than agrarian stewardship and localised provisioning. In this process, consumer modernity gradually displaces agrarian citizenship as the dominant framework through which rural populations engage food systems, social status, and economic participation. The mechanisms outlined in earlier sections, procurement exclusion, nutritional colonialism, and market capture, converge to position rural residents primarily as consumers rather than producers or co-stewards of food systems. Rural sociology has long argued that agrarian identity is anchored in practices of land stewardship, labour-sharing, and localised provisioning. However, supermarket expansion redefines rural belonging in terms of purchasing power, brand affiliation, and participation in national consumer culture [62]. The symbolic appeal of aisles, lighting, and curated shelves, what Charlton [25] calls the “aesthetics of modernity,” seduces rural residents into a consumer citizenship that promises dignity and inclusion but ultimately binds them to volatile global markets. Although supermarket environments project abundance and diversity, underlying ownership structures and supply systems remain highly concentrated [20]. Rural consumers believe they are exercising agency, yet their options are structurally constrained by upstream corporate decisions made far from their communities.

Contrasting these dynamics with counter-models of rural food sovereignty highlights the degree to which recolonisation is neither inevitable nor uncontested. Practices such as Zunde raMambo in Zimbabwe, homestead gardens in South Africa, and seed-sovereignty movements across the region demonstrate that rural communities continue to cultivate alternative pathways grounded in collective provisioning, agroecological knowledge, and territorial markets [71,80]. These models illustrate that rural food systems flourish where agency is localised and where production and cultural knowledge remain intertwined. The growing mobilisation around farmer field schools, agroecology and indigenous foodways suggests that rural citizens are actively reclaiming control from supermarket-dominated systems by redefining what counts as food, value and sovereignty. The tensions between supermarket modernity and agrarian sovereignty, therefore, represent not a linear transition but a contested terrain in which rural futures are being negotiated.

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that supermarket expansion materially, symbolically, and politically reorganises the foundations of rural life through the consolidation of corporate food governance. The Retail Recolonisation Thesis captures this multifaceted transformation by emphasising how supermarkets recolonise rural food systems through a combination of state-enabled infrastructural power, class-differentiating procurement systems, epistemic erasure, and consumer identity construction. This discussion underscores that resisting recolonisation requires more than incremental market reforms; it requires a reassertion of agrarian citizenship, where rural communities reclaim the right to define, produce, and govern their own food systems.

6. Recommendations

Policy and practice interventions capable of countering the rural recolonisation effects of supermarket expansion must operate simultaneously at regulatory, infrastructural, and sovereignty levels. Strengthening regulatory power is essential to rebalancing relations between corporate retailers and rural producers. Governments should establish enforceable local sourcing quotas for supermarkets operating in **South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia**, calibrated to product categories and regional seasonality, and monitored through transparent reporting requirements. Such quotas must be accompanied by anti-dumping rules and fair competition measures that prevent supermarkets from using below-cost pricing to eliminate informal traders and local grocers. Regulatory agencies should be mandated to track procurement concentration, buyer power, and price manipulation in small-town and rural markets, ensuring corporate accountability for exclusionary practices and their impacts on livelihoods.

Expanding rural infrastructure is equally crucial for promoting equal opportunities. Public investment in decentralised procurement hubs, rural aggregation centres, and community-managed cold chain systems would allow smallholders to meet quality and volume requirements without bearing disproportionate private costs. Certification support programmes covering Good Agricultural Practices, food safety, and grading should be embedded in extension services. These services should be delivered collaboratively with farmer associations, enabling small-scale producers to access both formal and territorial markets. These infrastructural reforms must be complemented by policies that expand access to affordable credit, transport links, and digital tools for rural producers, ensuring that participation in food economies is not limited to well-capitalised actors.

Embedding sovereignty frameworks in national food policy provides the long-term foundation for sustainable transformation. Governments should institutionalise food sovereignty principles by recognising farmers’ rights to seeds, land, and agroecological production; integrating territorial markets into urban and rural planning; and formally supporting traditional systems, such as Zunde raMambo and homestead food production. Such interventions are increasingly recognised internationally as necessary for rebuilding resilient local food systems capable of reducing dependency on concentrated global retail supply chains [89]. Policy design should ensure that rural households maintain meaningful control over their food sources, dietary practices, and local value chains, thereby reducing their vulnerability to external price shocks and supply disruptions. Together, these measures shift food governance away from supermarket-dominated regimes toward diversified, community-anchored systems that enhance resilience, rebuild agrarian citizenship, and secure equitable rural futures.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper reaffirms the Retail

Recolonisation Thesis: supermarket expansion in South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia is not a benign commercial diffusion but a structural reordering of rural economies, cultures, and identities. The empirical patterns across the three countries reveal a consistent logic. Supermarkets penetrate rural regions through state-enabled infrastructural development, concentrated procurement systems, and pricing strategies that initially appear pro-disadvantaged people but ultimately consolidate corporate control. The mechanisms of agrarian displacement procurement exclusion, culinary epistemicide, nutritional colonialism, the de-agrarianisation of rural subjectivities, and market capture demonstrate how deeply retail-led transformation now permeates rural life. Each mechanism contributes to a cumulative shift away from agrarian livelihoods and food cultures rooted in production, reciprocity, and local autonomy, toward a model in which rural households are primarily positioned as consumers embedded in distant, corporate-controlled food regimes.

Rural sociology provides the conceptual clarity needed to recognise that this transformation is not merely economic. It represents a profound restructuring of rurality itself. The spaces, rhythms, and identities of rural communities are being reorganised around retail infrastructures rather than agrarian practices. Supermarket aisles replace local markets as centres of social life; purchasing power supplants production as the axis of rural belonging; and value chains managed far from rural communities determine what food is grown, sold, and consumed within them. In this sense, supermarkets operate as governance institutions shaping diets, livelihoods, and cultural imaginaries as effectively as any state agency. The discussion also reveals that recolonisation is neither total nor uncontested. Rural communities continue to mobilise alternative models of food sovereignty that reassert local control, rebuild agrarian citizenship, and preserve knowledge systems that supermarkets erase. These counter-models offer a vision of rural autonomy not defined by consumer choice but by collective stewardship. The future of rural autonomy will depend on whether states and societies continue to cede food system governance to corporate retail or choose instead to nurture the territorial markets, seed sovereignties, and agroecological practices that anchor rural life in local agency. Rural resilience will not be secured in supermarket aisles, but in communities' capacity to reclaim the right to define and govern their own food systems.

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