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From Dependence to Resilience: Reforming Somalia's Global Trade Policy to Strengthen Food Security

When looking through the lens of a mother, there should be a sense of certainty in being able to provide for her family each day. However, for many mothers in Somalia, this is not their reality. Instead of providing comforting meals for their children, 6.5 million families face a constant uncertainty about their next meal (World Food Programme, 2026). Somalia suffers from a severe food insecurity crisis, which is largely due to the nation's heavy dependence on imported staple foods, particularly wheat. Before the year of 2022, almost 90% of Somalia's wheat came from Russia and Ukraine (International Rescue Committee, 2023). When the Russia - Ukraine war disrupted global exports,. The availability of essential foods such as wheat and other staple grains declined, grain prices rose sharply, and this in turn placed significant pressure on already vulnerable households. Historically, Somalia has relied so heavily on imported grains from these regions, that even small disruptions in the supply chain system have had severe consequences for food availability. This paper argues that Somalia should adopt a phased, government and NGO coordinated shift toward domestic teff cultivation, paired with guaranteed local markets, as a concrete pathway to reducing import dependence and strengthening long-term food security.

Somalia is a nation in the African continent with a population of 19.7 million people (United Nations Population Fund, 2025). Agriculture is difficult nationwide due to Somalia's arid climate, uneven rainfall, and frequent droughts, though its varied terrain — from the northern highlands to the central-southern plains — means some regions are still better suited to crop cultivation than others (USDS, 2010).

Somalia operates under a federal parliamentary republic system of government. This system was established in 2012 after decades of political instability and the collapse of the Somalian central government in 1991.And remains politically fragmented with limited state capacity, which is a key reason agricultural reform in Somalia has been slow and why any solution must rely on phased, partner-supported implementation rather than assuming strong central administration (Brookings, 2023).

In a country where a significant portion of the population lives below the poverty line, these rising costs of living have had devastating consequences. A typical family in Somalia often has 6 to 7 members, who live in rural areas or in informal urban settlements (Somalia Integrated Household Budget Survey, 2022). Many of these families rely on livestock and agricultural work along with small-scale trade as their primary source of income. Unfortunately, due to frequent droughts and limited economic opportunities, nearly half of the population has found it difficult to maintain stable earnings (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2026). As a result of this 7 out 10 households in Somalia live below

the poverty line, meaning they cannot afford basic necessities such as food, healthcare, and shelter (Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, 2021). Somalia's economy is still developing, heavily dependent on livestock, agriculture, and remittances from family living abroad. Livestock is the the largest contributor, with live exports such as goats, sheep, and camels all a major part in the nation's trade particularly with countries in the Middle East (Brittanica, 2026). Many rely on small-scale farming or animal husbandry for income, but once again climate instability makes these livelihoods unpredictable. On top of that nearly 40% of the population depends on remittances, which provide financial support for basic needs like food and housing (World Bank, 2018).

Although Somalia has access to global food markets, its dependence on a small number of suppliers makes it extremely vulnerable to external conflicts. One of the biggest contributing conflicts is the Russia - Ukraine war, as more that 90 percent of the nation's grain came from Russia and Ukraine (Norwegian Refugee Council 2023). As a result, over 1.4 million children in Somalia were projected to suffer from acute malnutrition just three years ago, and due to worsening global conflicts the numbers have only gotten worse (UNICEF, 2022). This is not a short-term crisis: acute malnutrition in early childhood carries lasting consequences, since children who survive severe malnutrition remain more susceptible to disease and can face permanent damage to physical and cognitive development, which in return significantly lowers school performance and lifetime earning potential. It is estimated that a 1% loss in adult height caused by childhood malnutrition translates to roughly 20% lower earnings later in life (World Bank, 2026). Even if supply chains were stable, Somalia's widespread poverty has limited purchasing power making it difficult to get food even when it is available.

In addition, Somalia has been affected by a devastating drought caused by a lack of rainfall. Over 58 million people across eastern Africa do not have access to clean drinking water, and 22.5% of Somalians rely on unsafe water due to poor sanitary practices (Oxfam International, 2026). This shortage of water is not only causing thirst, but has weakened the nation's agriculture and livestock productivity. Consequently, Somalia has had to rely on other nations for agricultural support. In 2024, Somalia's agricultural imports reached over 1.4 billion dollars, which is significantly greater when compared to 450 million dollars revenue the nation gains from agricultural exports (International Trade Administration, 2024). The agricultural trade deficit accentuates Somalia's reliance on other nations for support within their agricultural systems. Together, these factors underscore how interconnected global conflict and environmental challenges have been contributions to Somalia's ongoing hunger crisis.

Despite the seemingly dire situation, there are realistic and sustainable solutions to combating this devastating food shortage. One effective way to improve food security in Somalia is by strengthening domestic agriculture through promotion of crops that are native and well-adapted to the local climate. Along with the drought and heavy reliance on imported goods, Somalia also has an actively declining biodiversity and seed system (World Economic Forum, 2023). This shows a broader issue across the African continent – they produce food, but not for themselves. Large portions of farmland within Somalia and neighboring countries are dedicated to export crops like cocoa, coffee, and cotton (Deutsche Welle (DW), 2022). Traditional crops that have once well-adapted to Somalia's arid climate were gradually lost since the early 1980s, accelerating after the collapse of the central government in 1991, due to environmental degradation and corporate greed (World Economic Forum, 2023). This loss of biodiversity has reduced local farmers' ability to grow resilient crops that can withstand the drought and poor soil

conditions. To address the challenges at hand, Somalia must invest in restoring traditional and local seed systems by developing a more localized food system.

Creating a shorter, more localized food system in Somalia can contribute critically to improving food security whilst also strengthening their economy. Somalia should prioritize local agriculture to feed local populations. Essentially the nation should reduce their reliance on imported foods and build a more robust and sustainable supply chain. When food is produced and consumed within the country, it not only increases availability but also supports local farmers and creates economic opportunities within the communities (University of Missouri:Extension, 2022). This approach helps keep money circulating within the local economy, promoting further growth and stability.

By shifting the farmers focus towards traditional drought resistant crops such as sorghum, millet, and regionally suitable grains like teff, Somalia will be able to build a more sustainable agricultural foundation. These crops require less water, are better adapted to the harsh environmental conditions, and have historically supported food systems in the region (Oxford Academic, 2025). Teff (Eragrostis tef) is a nutrient-dense gluten-free cereal grass that is grown and consumed in Ethiopia is very valuable due to its ability to thrive in drought conditions and poor soils whilst providing high nutritional value, including essential nutrients like iron and calcium (MDPI Foods, 2024). Teff's cultural fit is aided by the fact that anjero, a fermented flatbread central to Somali cuisine, is very similar to Ethiopian injera, which is traditionally made from teff, meaning the crop does not require introducing an unfamiliar food, only a new grain within a familiar dish.

To encourage this shift, farmers should be incentivized through a mix of government support and economic opportunities. This can be through providing subsidies for farming tools and seeds; along with offering financial assistance through microloans. Additionally, the Somali government can invest in agricultural training programs that help farmers transition better to these crops. The creation of these stable markets by guaranteeing the purchase of locally grown crops can ensure that these farmers earn reliable incomes (ERS USDA, 2010). Ultimately, when farmers see that growing their traditional crops is both supported and profitable, they are far more likely to adopt these sustainable practices.

Building on this foundation, regional collaboration can play a critical role in ensuring successful adoption of crops like teff. Teff can successfully be incorporated into Somalia's agricultural system through regional collaboration with Ethiopia, where farmers and agricultural experts can share their knowledge, seeds, and cultivation techniques. Collaboration with Ethiopia and other regional actors is essential when thinking about the potential drawbacks of this grain, such as the need for proper harvesting and processing methods (Institute of Food Science and Technology, 2020). Ethiopian farmers typically grow teff on an annual rotation with other crops such as onions and common lentils and beans making it versatile and encouraging farmers to support local agriculture (Laterite, 2021). This form of crop rotation is both practical and beneficial for Somali farmers, as it does not require drastic changes to their existing farming practices while promoting crop diversification. By encouraging the cultivation of multiple crops alongside teff, farmers can increase overall productivity, and create a more stable and sustainable agricultural system (University of Missouri:Extension, 2022). Not only does this enhance food security but it also supports local economies by diversifying agricultural productivity and reducing reliance on a single crop.

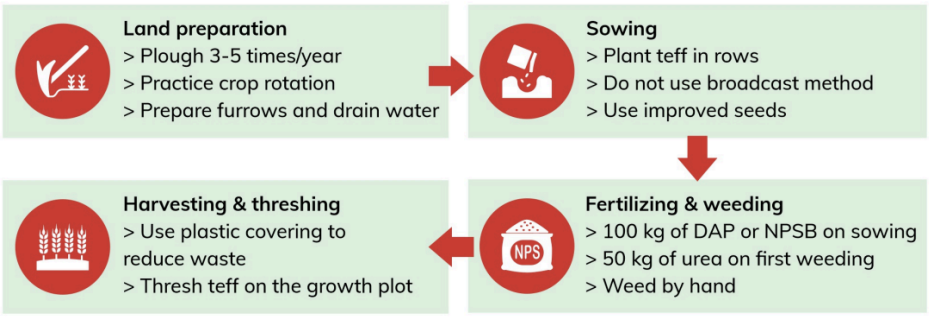

Fig. 1. "Teff Farming in Ethiopia: A Literature Review - Laterite." *Laterite.Com*, Sept. 2021, www.laterite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Teff-farming-in-Ethiopia-background-brief-vf.pdf .

Implementing a Teff-Based Agricultural Transition

A successful shift to teff cultivation requires a phased, funded, and locally administered program rather than a general policy statement. This paper proposes a three-phase model over five years.

Phase 1 – Pilot (years 1-2): The Somali Ministry of Agriculture in partnership with FAO Somalia and Ethiopia's Ministry of Agriculture, would launch teff cultivation in two to three pilot regions with climate conditions similar to Ethiopia's teff-growing highlands. Funding for this would come from existing humanitarian development channels already active in Somalia, including World Bank agricultural resilience grants and FAO's Somalia Water and Land Information Management program, rather than requiring new state revenue the government does not have. Ethiopian agricultural extension officers would train a first cohort of roughly 500 farmers in teff specific techniques such as: seed spacing, harvesting, and threshing. This is because teff's small seed size make it more labor-intensive to process than sorghum or maize.

Phase 2 – Market development (years 2 -3) : To minimize the risk of transitioning for the farmers, the government would establish a guaranteed minimum purchase price for pilot region teff, administered through local agricultural cooperatives rather than a centralized bureaucracy that the state may lack the ability to run. This is similar to the contract farming models already used in Somalia's livestock export sector. Alongside that, teff flour would be introduced into the World Food Programme school feeding programs already operating in Somalia, creating guaranteed institutional demand while the larger consumer market develops.

Phase 3 – Scale Up (year 3- 5): Based on the pilot program yield and adoption data, the program would expand to additional regions, with subsidies for seed and hand-milling tools phased out for early-adopter regions and redirected to new ones, keeping the program sustainable rather than an indefinite subsidy line.

This phased structure matters because Somalia's weak state capacity makes a single nation wide rollout unrealistic. A pilot-first model allows course correction before major resources are committed, and relies on international partners already present in the region rather than utilizing new government infrastructure.

Stakeholder Impact

Smallholder farmers bear the greatest transition risk, since shifting to teff means forgoing income from familiar crops during the learning period, the guaranteed purchase price in Phase 2 is designed to offset this. Livestock owning households, who make up much of Somalia's rural population, are not direct beneficiaries of a grain-focused program, which is why the pilot regions should prioritize agro-pastoral areas already engaged in some crop farming rather than a nationwide rollout.

Women are a critical adoption group, since they manage most household food preparation and are likely to judge whether teff is acceptable through anjero, making their inclusion in training programs essential rather than optional. The government gains a politically low-risk program that utilizes existing international funding rather than new domestic revenue, while consumers gain a staple insulated from the kind of import shocks that hit wheat, though affordability during the early, lower-yield years will need monitoring.

Somalia's food insecurity crisis is deeply rooted in its dependence on global markets and widespread poverty. The disruptions caused by the Russia-Ukraine war demonstrate how fragile Somalia's current food system is, as even distant conflicts can severely limit access to essential resources. A phased, teff centered transition, grounded in regional partnership with Ethiopia, local markets, and realistic accounting for Somalia's limited state capacity, offers a solid pathway toward a more resilient and self-sufficient food system. While this paper focuses on teff as the primary intervention, the same pilot to scale model could later extend to other drought resistant grains such as sorghum and millet , but a single, well supported starting point gives Somalia the best chance of a program that is actually implemented.

If teff cultivation reached even 15% of the households currently affected by wheat import volatility, and reduced their dependence on imported grain by a third, this would meaningfully reduce exposure to the kind of price shocks seen recently, while keeping a proportion of the $1.4 billion currently spent on agricultural imports circulating within Somalia’s domestic economy. Paired with school feeding demand and a phased 5 year rollout, this solution offers a legitimate, fundable pathway rather than a broad goal. By moving from dependence to resilience, Somalia can create a future where families no longer live in uncertainty, and mothers can confidently provide for their children three times a day, everyday.

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