

SA's black farming community needs sustainable agribusiness support, says AFGRI

According to AFGRI's recently-renamed Lemang Agricultural Services, access to finance, training and entrepreneurship is critical to building SA's black farming community. "With food security becoming an increasing concern for South Africa and the rest of the continent, it's important that agribusinesses such as AFGRI get behind our farmers, particularly black farmers wanting to take the next step into full commercialisation," says Marion Shikwinya, who heads up Lemang Agricultural Services.



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"We are very excited about the opportunities that agriculture offers, but there is a need to recognise the constraints that many new era farmers face. The first of these is the lack of access to affordable credit.

"Many are not able to access credit facilities to finance their operations, including state-of-the-art equipment and other new technologies required to increase production, and produce high-quality crops or livestock."

Lemang itself has a track record of success in assisting new era farmers, having trained and supported over 650 farmers in the past four years (in its previous capacity as Harvest Time Investments), resulting in over 18,400 hectares being planted, some 660 permanent jobs being created, and a total yield of 49,873 tonnes. On average, farm income has tripled in cases where Lemang has supported the farmer.

Assisting farmers with training

According to operations manager, Bankies Malan, the team can bring this track record to bear on assisting farmers to overcome another stumbling block, which is the lack of access to information and training. "Training – and access to the right information – is vital for farmers to succeed. Agribusinesses such as ours have huge role to play in ensuring our farmers are not only trained in the latest farming techniques but are also mentored and given relevant business skills. Knowing how to run a business is integral to growing a successful farming enterprise."

Malan says that while many systems put in place to help black farmers have failed due to a lack of funding or skills, particularly in rural areas, farmers should also think more innovatively, and not simply wait for assistance.

An easy solution he believes could work is for smaller new era farmers in rural areas to form “study groups”, allowing them to learn from external experts, who could be invited to attend the sessions, and from one another, a major source of knowledge-sharing, at the same time.

Driving sustainable success

However, critical to this kind of out-the-box thinking is a true desire to succeed as a farmer. "It takes real entrepreneurial spirit to set up this kind of initiative, but the benefits are huge, with farmers being able to tap into relevant knowledge when they need it, which will, in turn, inspire a spirit of independence and drive sustainable success."

He adds that communication also has a role to play connecting farmers with one another and to support systems. "Modern mobile technology makes it so much easier to get farmers around the table to learn from one another and from others. In fact, it's essential that we all capitalise on this technology, and explore better ways of connecting as a farming community."

Malan believes that if such ecosystems are established and are fully connected – to each farmer in a specific area through the study groups, as well as to other groups around the country using affordable and readily-available mobile technology – this scenario could give rise to mega farming communities across South Africa. "Imagine the power this will give new era farmers. With access to the right information when they need it, as well as access to training, mentoring and funding through companies like ours, they could be easily be fully integrated into the agricultural value chain."

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