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Citrus growers call for Brics trade deals

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Source: Next Century Foundation

South Africa's trade deficit with its Brics partners has ballooned significantly since it joined the bloc in 2010, highlighting the need for deeper economic integration amid global trade turbulence.

This is according to Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA) chief executive Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele, who highlighted the trend in his latest newsletter on Friday.

Ntshabele said South Africa had entered Brics with a trade deficit of R66 billion, which had worsened to R250bn by 2024 based on trade reports. He said the country was "going backwards" in terms of the deficit, saying the latest figure should concern all stakeholders.

He highlighted global trends where countries are actively securing new trade deals to diversify amid economic uncertainty.

"Looking at the headlines these past few weeks, one notices how countries everywhere – even the developed ones – are moving to secure new trade deals. India signing a trade pact with the EU, Canada with

China, the UK Prime Minister flying this week to Beijing in search of opportunities,” he said.

“The message is clear: everyone is seeking to diversify, because the global economy is in a state of turbulence. No one can afford to stand still and not shore up protection for their economy.”

But while some Brics nations are advancing bilateral ties, South Africa’s intra-bloc trade lags.

“I remember hearing last year about a possible partial trade pact with India. It sounded promising and was decidedly partial to protect our weaker sectors like textiles, while still opening doors in other areas. But it appears progress has stalled,” he said.

However, Ntshabele pointed to promising gains in citrus exports to India through targeted promotion.

“This last season, the CGA’s foray into promoting SA citrus in India has shown some promising results, and with more effort, a lot can be achieved.”

He called for South Africa to prioritise trade within Brics Plus.

“Shouldn’t Brics countries be prioritising each other? Some pragmatism is needed as the bloc cannot just be about solidarity and cooperation – trade surely must also be at the heart of it.”

Ntshabele endorsed agricultural economist Wandile Sihlobo’s recent call for a Brics trade agreement under India’s 2026 presidency.

“That is the kind of thinking we need in uncertain times.”

He noted that tariffs hindered competitiveness for South African agricultural products in key markets like India and China.

“Talk of friendliness and geopolitical categories will not take us further, but trade and the resultant job creation could. It will make a significant difference for agriculture as currently our products enter markets in India and China, subject to tariffs, making us uncompetitive, while others enter tariff-free,” he said.

“South Africa’s economy has shown some green shoots recently, but honestly, our unemployment crisis remains a serious emergency. We cannot afford to treat Brics membership as a diplomatic nice-to-have. We need to push, with urgency, for a Brics trade pact that actually delivers for South Africans.”

He added that South Africa was able to pursue diversified markets without geopolitical alignment.

“That said, it is still completely possible for South Africa to – like other countries – avoid getting caught up in a geopolitical game of one bloc versus another. The whole world loves our high-quality citrus. And we want to supply all the markets we possibly can,” Ntshabele said.

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