

Black youths must be made aware of agri sector careers

By Mlungisi Mama January 3, 2018 at 11:41 am

In his BCom Hons research paper, Mlungisi Mama examines why so few black youths are interested in agriculture as a career. His conclusion is that they believe the sector comprises little more than farmers and farmworkers, and are unaware of the job opportunities available in various agricultural disciplines. Rectifying this will demand an education campaign run jointly by several government departments.



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The unemployment rate among the youth (between the ages of 15 and 34) in South Africa is 43%. Yet young people in South Africa, and indeed all over the world, appear to show little interest in agriculture.

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In South Africa, there are an average of 15 571 vacant positions for professionals in the field of agriculture every year. Despite this, fewer than 3 000 students graduate each year to fill these positions (Kriel, 2015).

What I have stressed in my paper is that there are meaningful, well-paid professional jobs in agriculture such as agricultural economists and agronomists. Yet the majority of black youngsters are unaware of them. Most think that the only options available are as farmworkers (earning a minimum wage) or farm owners.

Black youngsters simply do not realise the potential that exists in the sector, and therefore do not take up agriculture-related studies. Yes, access to education is a problem for many, but even when they do gain access, few consider agriculture-related studies.

At the University of Stellenbosch, for example, the number of black students graduating with a bachelor's degree in agriculture is on average only slightly more than 20 per annum, compared with about 140 white students per year. This indicates that the white students see the potential and value that the sector offers.

The number of black students currently pursuing a BSc in agriculture may tell a different story, but the bottom line is that the sector needs to be promoted among black youths in South Africa because these numbers are by no means an accurate reflection of national demographics.

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The youth wage subsidy provides employers with an employment tax incentive (ETI). This consists of a subsidy of up to R1 000 per month for employing people aged between 18 and 29 who earn less than R6 000 and more than R2 000 per month for their first formal jobs.

This is reduced to R500 in the second year on the job, and falls away in the third year.

The scheme effectively introduces a two-tier labour market, which makes it cheaper to employ young workers without actually reducing their wages (Steyn, 2015).

Comparative salaries

A farmworker may earn R2 420 a *month as a minimum wage*, while, for example, a taxi driver will earn R2 872, a hospitality sector entrant R2 751, and an entry-level mineworker, R6 000.

Black youngsters will thus not be interested in entering the sector if only farmworker jobs at a minimum wage are on offer. On the other hand, they do not enter the professional agricultural sector either, mainly because they do not have the required qualifications because they do not pursue the necessary studies. Exposure is therefore key.

From a questionnaire I circulated to obtain empirical evidence for my paper, it was evident that respondents in the farming areas of the Eastern Cape and Western Cape were more willing to pursue a career in the sector. Respondents in Gauteng (Johannesburg), however, were more interested in pursuing careers in the financial services sector.

A very different view

Negative perceptions of agriculture play a major role in the choices of black youths. After witnessing the elderly suffer in the rural areas while farming livestock and vegetables, they see little potential in the sector.

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The sector is also not viewed as 'glamorous', in contrast with professions such as accountancy, where one wears a suit and works in a smart office.

What the majority of these youths do not realise is that a professional such as an agricultural economist can indeed work in a stylish corporate environment.

Maize is the most important field crop produced in South Africa, and the maize milling industry offers a number of professional employment opportunities.

The industry also has strong links throughout the economy, both upstream to the input industries and downstream to the milling, animal feed and food processing industries.

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As white people have traditionally been more exposed to agriculture, due to their extensive control of the sector, many farmers encourage their sons to study farm management and then return to run the family farm.

To ensure that black youths overcome the obstacles they face with regard to meaningful participation in the agricultural sector, a policy intervention meeting involving the Department of Communications, the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and the Department of Education would need to be convened.

The lack of awareness and education difficulties (black youths not enrolling for or failing to complete agriculture-related studies) will need to be addressed in such a meeting.

A joint effort by these departments would go a long way in ensuring that black youths are made aware of the opportunities in the agricultural sector, and will result in them participating in a meaningful way.

From my survey, it is clear that black youths – male and female – share the view that the sector does not have the potential to provide them with meaningful employment.

The views expressed in our weekly opinion piece do not necessarily reflect those of Farmer's Weekly.

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