

■ OPINION

PORTIA THOKOANE: 'Don't go', a message of hope for our youth

Young people can contribute to building a more resilient and thriving agricultural sector for the future

09 SEPTEMBER 2024 - 11:22

by PORTIA THOKOANE



Agriculture remains a cornerstone of SA's economic framework. Picture: 123RF/GRIGORENKO

Agriculture plays a pivotal role in the SA economy, contributing about 10% to the national GDP and providing employment for more than 2-million people. As a major contributor to the country's export earnings — agricultural products account for about 20% of total exports — the sector is vital to the nation's economic health.

Despite enduring challenges such as drought, pests and infrastructural inefficiencies, agriculture remains a cornerstone of SA's economic framework. Government initiatives, including the establishment of an agricultural development bank, subsidies for irrigation and mechanisation, and significant investments in research & development, reflect its commitment to sustaining and enhancing this crucial sector.

Last year was particularly challenging for SA's agricultural sector. The gross value added by agriculture, forestry and fishing dropped by 12.2% year on year, primarily due to severe difficulties in the livestock and poultry industries. Diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease and avian influenza weighed heavily on these subsectors, which account for nearly half of the sector's value. Further compounding these issues were infrastructure inefficiencies, including delays at ports and the deteriorating rail systems.

In terms of crop production, there were some bright spots. The 2022/23 maize harvest was a solid 16.4-million tonnes — 6% higher than the previous season — while the soybean harvest reached a record 2.8-million tonnes. Yet these gains were insufficient to offset the broader challenges.

Persistent issues such as rising crime, load-shedding and the lingering effects of the El Niño-induced drought in midsummer 2023, contributed to a 5% decline in primary agricultural employment, which fell to 896,000 in the second quarter of 2024.

For young people considering a future in agriculture these challenges might seem daunting. Yet there is reason for optimism. Despite the sector's recent struggles, agriculture remains a vital part of SA's economy, offering numerous opportunities for innovation and growth.

The government's commitment to expanding access to land and supporting sustainable farming practices presents a unique opportunity for the youth to engage in transformative agricultural ventures. Sustainable agriculture is increasingly seen as a pathway to long-term economic growth, particularly in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where agriculture is a key contributor to employment and food security.

Implementing sustainable practices at the grassroots level is complex, but essential. A structured framework is crucial for addressing the challenges faced by the agricultural sector, ensuring its positive contribution to the economy and job creation.

Looking ahead, SA's agriculture sector faces several challenges. To thrive in the long run, the sector must address outdated infrastructure and persistent animal health problems. A focus on policies that support both immediate recovery and sustained growth

is critical. This includes improving municipal services, upgrading rail and road networks, and tackling rising crime in rural areas.

Innovative partnerships and financing initiatives can also unlock the potential of smallholder farmers, providing them with the necessary resources to transition from subsistence farming. By addressing these challenges and leveraging global support, SA can ensure agriculture remains a key player in the economy and job market.

The involvement of young people in agriculture is of utmost importance. Fresh ideas and innovative approaches from the next generation can make a significant impact. By adopting new technologies and embracing sustainable farming practices, young professionals have the opportunity to drive the sector forward and ensure its future stability.

The emphasis placed by the Kenyan president on Africa's underutilised agricultural potential and the need for resilient, durable food systems further underscores the importance of empowering the youth with the skills and resources to lead this transformation.

Agriculture is not just a cornerstone of SA's economy; it holds vast potential for innovation, expansion and employment opportunities. With Africa possessing 65% of the world's arable land, its role in global food production is pivotal. By addressing current challenges and capitalising on government initiatives and sustainable practices, the youth can contribute to building a more resilient and thriving agricultural sector for the future.

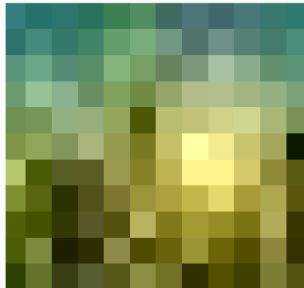
Efforts such as USAid's Feed the Future programme, which connects small-scale farmers with global agribusinesses, demonstrate the potential for international collaboration to enhance productivity and food security. SA, with its rich agricultural resources, stands to benefit immensely from such partnerships and investments.

Moving forward, collaboration between the government and the private sector will be crucial in addressing growth-constraining factors within agriculture. The sector's long-term sustainability depends on resolving issues such as port inefficiencies, improving rail and road infrastructure, and enhancing municipal service delivery.

As the country progresses, it is essential to focus on policies and initiatives that support the sector, ensuring its status as a

cornerstone of economic growth and development. Agriculture is not just vital to SA's economy; it is a sector brimming with potential for innovation, growth and job creation.

• *Thokoane is human resources director for Nestlé East and Southern Africa region.*



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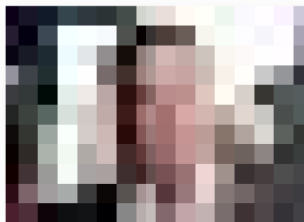
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