

■ OPINION / COLUMNISTS

WANDILE SIHLOBO: SA needs to grease the wheels, not reinvent them

The country has its agriculture master plan in place, but implementation is slow and erratic

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Picture: 123RF

Recent electoral polls continue to suggest no single political party will win an outright majority in the national elections on May 29. This creates uncertainty about the nature of the national government that will emerge from likely coalition discussions.

Regardless of its composition, the seventh administration of democratic SA will have to refresh its economic policies when it assumes office. For some sectors, such a review is as unavoidable as it is urgent. The global environment in which we operate has changed significantly in recent months, partly because of the rising geopolitical tensions and associated economic risks.

Agricultural policy does not require comprehensive review. What the sector needs is a sharper focus on the implementation of existing

programmes. The agricultural sector already has an ambitious and unifying vision through the Agriculture & Agro-processing Master Plan launched in May 2022.

The master plan is not perfect and some aspects were contested during its drafting stages. This was to be expected given the breadth of social partners involved in crafting it. Still, most social partners, such as the business community, government and labour, agree that the plan offers a framework to grow the agriculture and agro-processing sectors, build competitiveness, attract more investment, improve inclusion and create jobs.

This would help address SA's socioeconomic challenges, particularly in rural areas and small towns. Moreover, the department of agriculture, land reform & rural development has signalled its intention to release the roughly 2.5-million hectares of land it secured under the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy to beneficiaries, with title deeds.

This land release will be through the yet-to-be-launched Land Reform and Agricultural Development Agency. This agency has taken longer to come about than anticipated, but after informal discussions with the current leadership of the department, I believe there is a commitment to release the land to beneficiaries, with title deeds.

This land will help increase SA's agricultural output across various commodities. It is also through the promise of this land release that the Bureau for Food and Agriculture Policy and ourselves continue to believe that SA agriculture can continue to grow and expand employment in the coming years.

Admittedly, among the industry and organised agriculture stakeholders there has been growing anxiety about the slow pace of implementing the master plan. Government and social partners finished the plan at a tricky time. As the implementation process was set to start, various challenges took the focus away from the plan.

These include persistent load-shedding in recent years; logistical constraints at ports; protectionism in export markets such as China (wool), the EU (citrus), and the rest of Africa (vegetables); and the spread of animal disease (foot and mouth disease in cattle, African swine fever in pigs and avian influenza in poultry). These events

meant government and various industry stakeholders moved into “crisis” mode, and the attention shifted from the master plan.

As is often the case in SA with engagements between government and the private sector, political economy tensions tend to arise while resolving urgent and near-term issues. These tensions tend to strain trust and the collaborative vision, even if temporarily. Such an environment tends to result in slow action towards implementing the master plan.

Moreover, we often hear from agribusiness leaders about the cold reception they get from some provincial and local government offices that are instrumental to the success of the master plan’s implementation. This is an area the national government should focus on to ensure the alignment of vision and urgency of the adoption of policies and programmes.

Overall, SA’s agricultural policy does not require drastic change from now on, but a better focus on the implementation of existing policies. The one aspect that should be added to the toolkit of the department is continuous engagement with industry stakeholders and organised agriculture.

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