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Bid to transform productivity

Province aims to change agricultural sector by a community outreach, land care programme to sustain natural resources

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WITH the view to optimising productivity and sustainability of natural resources, the Free State department of agriculture and rural development aims to transform the sector with a community outreach programme and the land care community project.

This, as chief director of stakeholder relations and communications for the department Makenosi Maroo says, will lead to more production, food security and better living conditions. She says that the programme is community based and led and that the bottom up approach means that the vehicle of transformation is in gear.

"The programme provides capacity for previously disadvantaged land users, farmers and youth strive for sustainable developments and involvement in the agrarian sector," she said.

The chief director also said that they were targeting the poorest individuals so that socio-economic means are improved and that would manifest into the care of the land resources. Community members were offered temporary jobs and were helped with skills programmes which would allow them to be farmers.

A lack of funds for the programme and limited awareness contributes to the barriers in the adequate implementation of the programme while the land faces degeneration due to factors such as slash-and-burn, soil erosion, conventional farming, overgrazing of communal, commonage and farmland.

Maroo said: "Land users (farmers), the community at large, the school community and the province provides structural and technical capacity to implement the projects."

Funding is only provided through the conditional grant that is administered by the Division of Revenue Act. She says that funds are transferred from the national Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries which manages implementation of approved projects.

Through the expanded public works the programme has resulted in almost



FOOD SECURITY: The province aims to transform agriculture and farming to better production potential for arable land and an improvement in quantity and quality by mitigating disaster risk for the sector. PHOTO: HAPPEL/REUTERS

400 opportunities since April last year on presently approved projects. The outcomes of the programme include improving production potential for arable land, an improvement in quantity and quality by mitigating disaster risk for the sector.

Maroo made note of the programmes aimed at youth participation in the project which would ensure inter-generational transfer of skills in agriculture.

This along with improving livelihoods of rural community through the green economy and improving partnership with private, public and community sectors that are responsible for natural

resources form some of the core outputs the programme aspires to achieve.

"Land care programme focuses on promotion of conservation agriculture which results in more feedstock of diversified crops, fodder and feeds to drive agro processing. The exit plan of the programme is geared towards value addition," Maroo said.

This programme will generate much needed skill incentives that will drive toward a more representative farming economy in the heart of the agricultural capital of the country, in a largely skewed sector especially in the commercial sphere.

In a 2015 WWF report entitled Farming Facts and Futures: Reconnecting South Africa's food systems to its ecosystems.

The organisation named farming as a cornerstone of developing countries, it found that there is a dual economy in the agricultural sector referring to statistics provided by the minister of economic development commercial farmers produce 95% of local feed produce, leaving the remaining percentage to 220 000 emerging farmers and 2 million subsistence farmers.

This is made worse is that of the 53 million in South Africa one in four

people presently suffer from hunger. Oxfam said half the population lived in circumstances that they were at risk of going hungry in 2014. Agriculture contributes 2% to the gross domestic product of the country and a further 12% from manufacturing as well as processing in the sector.

Quoting the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform's review on the matter in 2009 it found that: "Almost R30bn on a process that has transferred less than 7 million hectares of commercial farmland (constituting only 2% of white-owned, commercial agricultural land), most of which is now

operating sub-optimally or no longer in productive use."

Christo van der Rhee of Agri SA says that for the sector to grow policy certainty, a pro-commercial approach to agriculture by the state, reductions in admin costs as well as crime are some of the hopes that should be cleared.

He further says that some protection from produce from other countries is important and a cautious approach to land reform would also strengthen the sector.

On the issue of black farmers he said that there should be long term and targeted assistance for emerging black farmers as well as an assurance that black farmers who are in the commercial farming business receive title deeds subject to a long-term financial payment schemes for land allocated to them.

On transformation in the sector he saw incentives as a way to attain redress.

"Involve and incentivise commercial farmers to create partnerships with their workers and with small scale farming cooperatives.

"Also incentivise agri-businesses to bring new black farmers into the value chain. Best practices aimed at transformation are abound in South Africa and the private sector play a huge role in terms of ensuring successful transformation best practices.

"Unfortunately the same cannot be said of the many land reform projects under the government's auspices. Most of it imploded due to corruption, lack of post-settlement support and resulted in large-scale production and job losses," Van der Rhee said.

On job creation he believes that there needs to be more support for investing in the entire agricultural value chain from input to retail and encouraged partnerships between commercial farmers and black industrialists.

He warned against exorbitant labour and administrative costs, saying an increase in these costs will over time lead to higher mechanisation and shrinking job opportunities.

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