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BOTTOM LINE AfriForum

Unlocking the potential of poor communities

Barend Uys, head of intercultural relations and co-operation at AfriForum, says the time has come to help neglected communities suffering due to poverty and hunger improve their conditions. **Annelie Coleman** asked him about AfriForum's vision for these people.

How did AfriForum's commitment to and involvement with these communities come about?

I've had the privilege of travelling in the deep rural areas of this beautiful country. Each has its own natural beauty: the rocky hills of Sekhukhuneland, the valleys of the Zulu Kingdom, and the aloes and cliffs of Mpondoland. But what also catches the eye is the raw potential lying patiently, waiting to bear fruit for those willing to work the land and invest sweat and tears.

I was first introduced to the traditional areas during a 2018 visit to the late Zulu king, His Majesty King Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu. He recollected how he'd worked the fields as a young man and how the land of the Zulu Kingdom was productive in days gone by. He related the suffering caused by the decline in food production in the rural areas, one of the reasons being the system of social grants. He invited the Solidarity Movement to support him in his quest to utilise agricultural land for production, and reminded us of co-operation in the time of his great-grandfather, King Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo.

These are extreme challenges, but there's also huge potential. How does AfriForum plan to tap into this?

When your aim is to create solutions to real-world problems and achieve tangible outcomes at grass-roots level, you don't have the luxury of working with ideologies; you need to work with reality. Farmers do, and nothing keeps you more in touch with reality than praying for rain, fighting a veld fire, discovering there are animals missing when you do your evening count, or seeing your centre pivot standing idle during rolling blackouts.

South Africa is a highly complex society comprising different cultural groups, each with its unique heritage, culture, customs and language. Traditional communities and leadership structures are part of our reality, and they have potential if we allow ourselves to see it. There's complexity not



RIGHT:
Barend Uys.

only in our current reality, but in our past. We can choose to find only the worst in history and use that to polarise society, or we can find the beautiful and use that to inspire the next generation.

This obviously calls for good interracial relations and communication.

The history of Southern Africa abounds with examples of cultural communities coexisting peacefully based on good relations and mutual respect.

Unfortunately, there are also ample examples of the terrible consequences when relations between communities deteriorate. If we want future generations of the cultural communities of Southern Africa to live in peace, it's imperative to maintain good intercultural relations.

In order to establish a relationship, the parties must get to understand each other, and the best way to achieve this is to co-operate on matters of mutual interest.

Dr Anton Rupert once said that you won't sleep peacefully when your neighbour is hungry. Theft can never be condoned, but crop and stock theft, especially where socio-economic problems are rife, is a testament to this reality. People who have something to eat will be less likely to steal produce.

Is it not the government's responsibility to develop affected communities and bring them peace and prosperity?

The challenges faced by communities on the subcontinent are simply too vast for any government to solve. Community self-sufficiency is the only lasting solution to socio-economic problems.

We should be careful not to see the current reality as the only way things have ever been, or can ever be. When I speak to traditional communities in the deep rural areas, I ask them a simple question: "How did you manage to have food to eat in, for example, the late 1800s?"



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“Was there a government that provided food or provided money to buy food?” The answer is always the same: “We produced our own food.”

Communities face a choice between revolution and reformation. Unfortunately, the message from the political elite and populists is mostly a message of revolution, and history is full of evidence of the dire consequences of choosing this option. Communities can, however, decide to rediscover who they are, and who they can be. They can find the seeds of solutions and proven values, and combine these with modern knowledge and technology to restore their dignity and well-being in partnership with other stakeholders.

What role can agriculture play in the future prosperity of neglected communities?

A one-size-fits-all approach to communities and individuals is doomed to fail. It's a simple reality that only a minority of people are entrepreneurs or farmers. If we think that we'll convert every member of a rural community into a successful commercial farmer, we're disconnected from reality. But what we can do is to follow an organic process where those with potential are identified and supported. Achievers must be rewarded. The main aim is not to produce food but to create wealth, for one needs more than food to thrive.

At the same time, however, we can support the creation of household vegetable gardens and encourage self-sufficiency and taking responsibility for the well-being of one's family. We need to reignite people's pride in having the ability to produce their own food and having the means to assist the vulnerable. Initiatives such as the Gardens of Faithfulness programme, which is part of the Farming God's Way initiative, should therefore be supported wholeheartedly.

You've mentioned that the development of communities who had been left to rack and ruin called for a practical approach. Could you please explain this?

The most important element of success is the attitude of the community and its leadership.

To establish a vegetable garden takes commitment; it requires more than sitting next to a road doing nothing as part of an Expanded Public Works programme. A willingness to learn new skills, obtain knowledge and work hard is key. But this mindset must be supported by mentorship, and in most cases, financial support to get out of the blocks.

We're therefore talking about a partnership between a community, local commercial farmers, agricultural businesses and funders (partly to pay for the time and input from commercial farmers). This partnership must be built on a



shared vision. We launch small projects and these are then expanded if successful. This approach offers the best chance of additional funding.

Please tell us more about the communities you're involved with.

In 2020, AfriForum, Pioneer, the Southern African Agri Initiative (SAAI), Agri All Africa (AaA), and the Boiphihlelo Co-operative started a joint agricultural development project at Noga's Post village in Thaba 'Nchu near Bloemfontein. The first maize crop was harvested in July 2021.

Above-average rainfall prevented the planting of sunflower during the 2021/22 season, but wheat will be planted in the coming weeks.

A community vegetable garden was also started at the end of 2021 and some produce was sold despite weather challenges. AfriForum and SAAI are also co-operating with Prince Bambindlovu Zulu to improve an agricultural development project at KwaKhangelamankengane, south of Pongola in KwaZulu-Natal. The first step was the design and installation of a more effective drip irrigation system in June this year.

AfriForum, the office of iNkosi Zwelothando Mabandla, SAAI and AaA also recently took the first steps towards the establishment of a joint agricultural development project for the AmaBhele kaJamangile traditional community, near Maclear in the Eastern Cape.

Many agricultural development initiatives have failed. Why should this effort be any different?

We're planning for the next generation, not the next election, and we're trying to do what's right, not necessarily what's popular. We're human and will make mistakes, but we'll persevere, and we're drawing from the wisdom of those who came before us. We're restoring responsibility, self-sufficiency, cultural pride and dignity. We're not just co-operating; we're building lasting relationships.

We have no other choice but to be successful. If we're not, the children of our communities will not be able to live free, safe and prosperous lives in the land of our birth that we love so much.

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ABOVE:

'I'm certain we'll be able to make a success of this planned agricultural development project with the support of a network of committed stakeholders,' says Barend Uys, head of intercultural relations and co-operation at AfriForum.
ANNELIE COLEMAN