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The stories we tell about South African agriculture matter

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Domestic agricultural output has more than doubled since 1994. Last year, South Africa was the 32nd largest agricultural exporter in the world. The sector has played a major role in establishing national (though not household) food security. Although we remain a country of “two agricultures”, not least because of the inertia of government, overall, the sector has benefitted substantially under democracy. We need to focus on what we can fix to promote inclusivity and not become mired in the “doom-saying” by some international (and local) players.

No one denies that South Africa's agriculture faces various challenges, including stock theft, animal diseases, inept municipalities, crime, and poorly maintained roads, among others. [Stories of the failings of land reform farms](#) add to the challenges facing this sector. But this is not the complete story, not even close.

Presenting such challenges as evidence that South Africa's agricultural sector is under siege, and suggesting that the U.S. President, Donald Trump, will be the saviour of our domestic challenges, is misleading and counterproductive.

These are challenges that will be resolved by South Africans, the government, organised agriculture, and other social partners.

Most notably, the constant doom that some among us continue to proclaim, suggesting that the sector is under threat, also risks presenting the sector as an unsustainable supplier of agricultural produce to an uninformed international observer.

The reality of the South African farming sector is quite different. The sector has grown tremendously since the dawn of democracy in 1994. Data from the Department of Agriculture [shows that domestic agricultural output in 2023/24 was more than twice that in 1994](#).

There is widespread expansion in output across all major subsectors: livestock, horticulture, and field crops.

Drivers of progress

New production technologies, improved farming skills, growing demand (locally and globally), and progressive trade policy underpin this expansion.

Notably, the private sector has played a major role in this progress through continuous investments and by ensuring we have the latest technologies to drive agricultural productivity and efficiencies in the value chain. These range from better seed cultivars and improved animal genetics to on-farm investments, amongst other interventions.

Regarding trade, I use the “progressive trade policy” to highlight South Africa's standing in global agriculture. According to data from Trade Map, the country was the world's 32nd-largest agricultural exporter in 2024, the only African country in the top 40 by value.

This was made possible by a range of trade agreements the South African government has secured over the past decades, the most important being those with African countries, Europe, the Americas, and some Asian countries.

The African continent and Europe now account for about two-thirds of South Africa's agricultural exports, and Asia is also an important market.

The agricultural subsectors that have contributed most to this progress in exports are fruits, wine, wool, and grains. South Africa now exports roughly half of its agricultural products by value, reaching a record \$13,7 billion in 2024.

Robust food security levels

This agricultural progress has also placed South Africa in a favourable position regarding food supplies. We are now food-secure at the national level. Admittedly, at the household level, we still face a challenge of food insecurity.

Household food insecurity has many different causes. Income poverty is one driver of household food insecurity in the country. Resolving it requires broader economic reform that prioritises and supports job creation beyond agriculture.

Still, leaning on the positive national picture of food security, South Africa is now ranked 59th out of 113 countries in the [global food security index](#), making it the most food-secure country in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The global food security index balances the four elements (affordability, availability, quality, and safety) to arrive at a rating that covers matters at a broad national level.

Inclusiveness

With the progress we have made, the sector has more than doubled since 1994. There remains room for more focused work to drive inclusivity in South Africa's sector.

As I argued in my book, [A Country of Two Agricultures](#):

"Nearly three decades after the dawn of democracy, South Africa has remained a country of 'two agricultures'. On the one hand, we have a subsistence, primarily non-commercial and black farming segment; on the other, we have predominantly commercial and white farmers."

The book adds that:

"The democratic government's corrective policies and programmes to unify the sector and build an inclusive agricultural economy have suffered failures since 1994. The private sector has also not provided many successful partnership programmes to foster black farmers' inclusion in scale commercial production. It is no surprise that institutions such as the National Agricultural Marketing Council estimate that black farmers account for less than 10%, on average, of commercial agricultural production in South Africa."

Indeed, this lacklustre contribution by black farmers in commercial agriculture cannot be blamed solely on historical legacies. The ANC government has added to the black farmers' state of despair.

In the book, I also reflected on some green shoots of inclusivity, highlighting that:

"While this paints a bleak picture of transformation in the agricultural sector, what we can also not ignore is the anecdotal evidence pointing to a rise of black farmers in some corners of South Africa. We see this in field crops, horticulture and livestock in provinces such as Free State, Western Cape, Eastern Cape and other regions."

Encouragingly, there are plans in place to ensure continued progress in the inclusion of black farmers. Importantly, their inclusion will not be at the expense of existing and aspiring white farmers. The goal is to ensure the sector has shared prosperity.

Such a plan is the Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan. It was co-created by government, organised agriculture, and labour, amongst other social partners.

Those South Africans, and farmer associations, who oppose progress have also argued that the plan is not "inclusive of farmers", which is misleading. The ideas in it are not even new; they essentially present a framework for implementing Chapter Six of the National Development Plan, which South Africans widely accepted.

Given the political temperature of the moment, I must emphasise that the Agriculture and Agro processing Master Plan does not argue for replacing existing farmers with new black farmers.

The government has around [2.5 million hectares of land](#) to distribute with title deeds to black farmers. The inclusivity journey will start from here. It will be "**growing the agricultural sector**".

Indeed, the land reform process will continue beyond the distribution of this land, but it **must** continue under the [current market principles](#). There should be no attempt to undermine property rights and investment in this sector.

Disappointingly, the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development has so far failed to move quickly in releasing this land to deserving black farmers, in partnership with organised agriculture. The inertia of the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development adds to the frustrations of many black farmers in this country.

The speedy release of the land and partnerships with the Land Bank and the Department of Agriculture on their Blended Finance Instrument would drastically increase the contribution of black farmers to commercial output and ensure the sector's output and job creation improve.

The only responsible thing right now is for the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development to **stop being a problem** and adopt a more constructive approach.

Conclusion

Overall, what remains important, is that the stories we tell about ourselves and the country matter. They shape views domestically, and how others outside view us.

The constant doom-saying by some among us that things are horrible in agriculture supports and aids the misleading statements of U.S. President Donald Trump and is unhelpful. What remains essential is sharing the realities, while also urging continuous progress and shared prosperity.

There is overwhelming evidence that South Africa's agriculture has benefited from its connectivity with the world since 1994.

Equally important, inept municipalities, poor road infrastructure, stock theft, and crime, among other things, require a stronger focus to support the long-term growth of South Africa's agriculture.

This will require the efforts of the government, organised agriculture, and the private sector. Addressing these issues must start with boldly telling the positive story of this sector and protecting the fortunes it has created for South Africa.

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