

Seeds of hope sown as small farmers grow

Agricultural schemes aimed at putting the rural poor back to work while also contributing to food security have been springing up all over SA.



They are the initiatives of non-governmental organisations, the government itself and supermarket chains, which see an opportunity to source some of their fresh-produce from poorer communities. It is impossible to measure any widespread success at present, but there is no doubt the schemes are making a difference in the lives of at least some people.

One fledgling initiative is Ezemvelo, Massmart's Direct Farm Programme, launched about a year ago and now operating in four provinces - Limpopo, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal.

In terms of its agreement with the government when it was bought by Walmart in June 2011, Massmart committed R100m to a "supplier development fund" that would essentially see it sourcing produce from smallholder farmers.

Sherry-Lee Singh, the group's supplier development manager, says last year the company bought 514 tons of vegetables from small farmers participating in its programme.

"By October this year we're expecting 3,000 tons to be delivered," she says.

The number of participating farmers has grown from 40 at the end of last year to 162 at present.

Umbrella co-operative

A participating farming umbrella co-operative calling itself The Gift of Service comprises 27 farmers - 18 women among them - and is spread across four sites around Inanda Dam in KwaZulu-Natal.

With 4.5ha under production these farmers are growing cabbages and spinach, much of it bought by Massmart at the prevailing market prices.

Hamilton Mazibuko, Massmart's farming co-ordinator in the region, says there are plans to expand the land under production and to rotate the cabbage patches with butternut.

Showing members of the media a 1ha smallholding, he says that about 25,000 cabbages are growing in the field and are worth about R100,000 at prices achieved at the market last week.

Seven co-operative members have a stake in this particular field and the amount that they earn comes three times a year and is used to pay costs of between R20,000 and R30,000 a hectare with transport costs over and above that.

"No, it doesn't leave a lot but it is something for the community and this is just the beginning," says Mazibuko.

Vehicle of unity

Mbali Ismail, a member of the Nqolobane Yobumbeno ("Vehicle of Unity") co-operative at Inanda Dam, stepped out of a farming training session to discuss the venture. "We joined together so that we could co-operate on cluster farming all around the dam. It means we can share labour forces and share the knowledge that we acquire."

"The collaboration among the farmers started before the Massmart involvement," she says.

"But their entry has given us a guaranteed market for our crops. We sell about 80% of what we grow to them. The rest we sell to the local community," Ismail says.

Fellow co-operative member, Vusi Buthelezi, admits the money is not great yet, but says it is more important that farmers help themselves and employ people from the community. "It is not much but it is better than nothing," Buthelezi says.

Seed workshop

The pair were attending a workshop run by Hygrotech, a South African seed and agricultural training company. Hygrotech national technical manager Paddy de Vries says apart from the workshops, the company has designed a series of agriculture training manuals for farmers.

"The company provides seed at discounted prices and in its training concentrates on sustainable farming practices to improve yields," he says. "We look forward to rolling out our training curriculum into more project sites where Massmart's farm programme is in operation," he adds.

The farmers have also been working with a commercial farmer, who has guided them on cultivating and managing their spinach and cabbage crops.

International non-profit organisation Technoserve, which promotes business as a solution to poverty, negotiates prices with Massmart on behalf of the farmers. All the co-operatives' activity takes place on communal land administered by the Zulu king and used free by the smallholder farmers.

Buthelezi says there is further land available and farmers will be able to use between 20ha and 25ha once it has cleared of bush and prepared for farming.

Source: Business Day via I-Net Bridge