

Employing innovative ideas for sustainable agriculture

During the recent TLU SA annual congress, the organisation conveyed to its members, affiliation and supporters that South African agriculture will remain sustainable through ongoing innovation, renewed creativity and exploitation of opportunities presented, despite the numerous challenges it is facing. "Sustainable agriculture can be defined in many ways, yet the most accurate description is that it sustains farmers, resources and surrounding communities through the promotion of profitable, environmentally-responsible farming activities in the interest of all citizens of South Africa," says Mr Louis Meintjes, TLU SA president. "Any business must be profitable for it to be economically feasible."



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Dr Philip Theunissen, an agricultural economist, challenged attendees to explore all opportunities to maintain and expand farm profits.

"Productivity improvement, sprouting from innovation and the application of technology, is the prime source of economic growth in agriculture," he said. "The reason why farmers can produce food for a burgeoning population at an ever lower cost, is due to ongoing farming improvements. The reality is that optimal profit is not an end destination, but rather an elusive objective to be continually pursued through the application of experience and technology."

TLU SA's view has always been that socially and economically healthy local communities can only be maintained by a flourishing commercial agricultural sector. In his overview of the South African economy, well-known agricultural economist Ulrich Joubert focussed on various vital aspects of the agricultural sector.

"The rand is very sensitive to international changes and local uncertainties," he says. "In the long term, one can expect the rand to decline against more prominent currencies, and this should focus our attention on problems in the agricultural sector."

Combatting industry challenges

Despite the general consensus on the importance of the commercial agricultural sector for a healthy economy, increasing challenges continue to plague the sector. "Factors like failed land redistribution projects, the threat of expropriation without compensation, agriculturally-hostile legislation, the collapse of infrastructure on practically all levels, climate challenges and ongoing economic decline contribute to the vulnerability of the sector," said Meintjes.

During the congress, Terence Corrigan, project manager at the South African Institute for Race Relations, emphasised the vital importance of private ownership as the basis for economic growth. "Don't put your trust in foreign countries to save us. We are just not that important to them. What matters is how we organise in South Africa, how we fight for the retention of private ownership rights.

"We are not going to win this argument by canvassing the president and politicians. We need to change the perception of the broader population by building persuasive arguments for education and a middleclass lifestyle to expose more people to a new and sustainable perspective.

Exploring technological opportunities

Change specialist Juanita Vorster encouraged attendees to convert challenges into opportunities by embracing change and welcoming disruption and innovation through technology. "Whatever worked in the past, in all likelihood won't work in the future," she says. "That which is foreign to us now will be the norm in a few years. It is important to change, and it takes much courage, but you have to choose while choice is still an option."

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