

# Potatoes SA campaign to unpack position of potatoes during pandemic

Potatoes South Africa (PSA) has embarked on a bold awareness campaign in a bid to create perspective around the resilience and performance of the potato industry's stakeholders, especially in the context of South Africa recently marking its first-year anniversary of the Covid-19 disruption.



Image Source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

Called #WhenHopeWhispers, the campaign aims to highlight the indomitable spirit and contributions of various stakeholders from the potato industry before culminating in an inaugural State of the Potato Industry Address (Sopia) on 5 May 2021.

True to its central theme of resilience and optimism, #WhenHopeWhispers will not only focus on Sopia, but will also give voice to the manifold movers and shakers who propel the potato industry forward. These unsung heroes are made up of producers, distributors, consumers, informal traders, and retailers.

## Nutrition, poverty alleviation

Coinciding with the United Nations' International Year of Fruits and Vegetables (2021), PSA could not have chosen a better time to launch #WhenHopeWhispers. As such, through a range of written and video recorded stories from various stakeholders, #WhenHopeWhispers will underpin the recent decision by the 75th General Assembly of the UN to prioritise nutrition and poverty alleviation through fresh produce production.

It is furthermore fitting to notice that in tandem with a comprehensive report, Sophia will be delivered in the same month as World Hunger Day, which falls on 28 May 2021.

Sophia also aims to introduce PSA's newly appointed CEO, Willie Jacobs who asserts that the report will provide an all-inclusive exposition on the state of the industry, thereby sketching an invaluable overview of how the world's biggest non-grain crop can help achieve the UN's sustainable development goals.

"Using data and real testimonies from those that not only survived the socio-economic onslaught caused by the pandemic but managed to thrive, this report will inform policy, strategies and the tools necessary to navigate both current and future challenges," he adds.

## Optimising industry impact

Closer to home, Jacobs remarks that if the agricultural sector is to stimulate South Africa's economy, all-around and continued involvement from role players will be required to optimise the potato industry's impact.

Looking at our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment statistics, he has reason to be optimistic about agriculture providing the necessary momentum for socio-economic progress.

For the second quarter (Q2) of 2020, Stats SA reported that the farming sector, along with forestry and fisheries, was the only positive contributor to the country's GDP, adding growth of 15.1% while the economy contracted by 51% quarter-on-quarter.

In addition to the agricultural sector's above-average Q2 performance, providing hope where economic heft was wholly lacking because of the lash of lockdown, it is worth noting that potato production heralds 50% of the country's crops, yielding at least R6.6bn for South Africa's economy.

Over and above PSA representing some 570 producers across 16 regions of production, the potato industry provided employment for between 50,000 and 60,000 permanent and temporary employees across South Africa.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 and the resultant curbing measures dealt a punishing blow to the farming sector, eroding profits and reducing growth to the extent that employment fell by 31% quarter-on-quarter in the Western Cape during the height of the country's initial lockdown period. In the Northern Cape, the adverse impact on employment for the same period was 15% quarter-on-quarter.



### New campaign to highlight the versatility of potatoes

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Potatoes, like all other fresh produce are sold through multiple channels, with national fresh produce markets being the main driver of fresh produce sales. During alert level 5 and 4 of the #SALockdown, the restrictive regulations limited trade, thereby inspiring traders and producers to find direct ways of connecting. Volumes recorded by PSA under the levy

requirements revealed a migration from national fresh produce markets to direct transacting.

Since then, that trend has mushroomed and caused a hard blow to the informal sector – a sector that accounts for the trade of 66% of potatoes at national fresh produce markets.

#WhenHopeWhispers, says Jacobs, will especially look at the trials and tribulations of fresh produce informal traders which takes up 36% of the total potato crop. "Informal traders were hardest hit during level 5 of last year's lockdown", says Jacobs.

"They were not allowed to sell and were not allowed to buy from fresh produce markets. It forced the government to modify regulations to be a lot more inclusive of informal traders by the third week."

The video-recorded testimonies that #WhenHopeWhispers will air, Jacobs emphasises, will shed heartfelt light "on understanding the plight of these traders and help us highlight the indomitable spirit at grassroots level of a sector that strives and thrives against all odds".

## **Resilience through adversity**

In looking at the totality of South Africa's potato industry, Jacobs enthuses that #WhenHopeWhispers and the ensuing Sopia "will tell a story of hope, resilience, and fortitude in times of great adversity and crisis".

It is also important, Jacobs remarks, that outdated perceptions about the quality of potatoes purchased from informal traders be re-examined. Contrary to popular belief, informal traders take pride in the quality of fresh produce they make available to end consumers.

Apart from the effect of Covid-19, #WhenHopeWhispers will also be looking at issues such as dumping by European countries whose cheap frozen potato chip imports eat into South Africa's potato potential.

"When you take away market share, you are taking away employment and causing a ripple effect. It has become very clear that now is the time to support local."

Along with changing perceptions, #WhenHopeWhispers will also be looking at trends, especially consumer and consumption habits that have been turned on its head since the Covid-19 outbreak.

Recognised for being naturally high in fibre, chromium, and potassium, crucial for proper cardio-vascular functioning, a 150g serving of boiled or baked potato, with skin, will provide 710mg of potassium which translates to 20% of the daily recommended potassium intake for South Africans.

## **Potassium powerhouse**

Together with their high potassium content, potatoes are low in sodium and therefore have a naturally high ratio of potassium to sodium, which has a strong blood pressure-lowering effect. Potatoes are lately punted as a heart-healthy food by the Heart & Stroke Foundation of South Africa when prepared in a healthy manner, consumed with the skin on and dressed in quality herbs and spices.

As for Covid-19, experts have found that buying processed products with a longer shelf life and prioritising staples such as potatoes above luxury foods, is a trend that will most likely stay once the fight to curb the virus eases.

In line with this view, it is felt that the robust but humble little spud and its relatively long shelf life will outlast fussier, "fancier" consumables.

This is especially the case considering predictions that consumers will increasingly seek to buy food that is not only

cheaper but more adept at holding hunger and health issues at bay.

Talking about the world's biggest none-grain crop is important though, says Jacobs. "It's one of the most versatile crops and vegetable sources in South Africa whose nourishing role in our lives cannot be overstated".

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