

Achieving inclusive growth in South Africa's agriculture under the Government of National Unity

- The South African agriculture sector is not immune to politics. Agriculture is a vital sector of the economy. This explains why it earned special attention in the National Development Plan (NDP), with an entire chapter, Chapter Six, dedicated to it. Recently, there have also been pragmatic plans such as the Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan (AAMP) that set out practical steps to realize a vision to grow the sector and bolster its global competitiveness while achieving inclusion and transformation.
- The sector must not be a casualty of politics. It is a force for good in growing the South African economy and advancing the country's place on the global map. As various political parties deliberate on the future Government of National Unity, they must keep the agricultural sector uppermost in their mind. This is a sector that should offer an avenue of convergence across the political spectrum: it is crucial for rural development, food security, and employment creation.
- What should priority areas be in achieving a consensus across the different political persuasions? Some of the critical areas that deserve emphasis include protecting property rights. Moreover, the government should continue to release the state's over two million hectares of land acquired over the past few decades to appropriately selected beneficiaries. Title deeds should be a priority as they lend these beneficiaries much-needed dignity and a source of financing. Still, releasing the government's land should not be the end-all for the land reform programme. Land reform should continue through all its existing levers: redistribution, restitution, and land tenure.
- To successfully achieve transformative outcomes in agriculture, state capacity should be reinforced. The various directorates in the government that run programmes associated with land reform must be bolstered, and corruption must be dealt with decisively so that the resources for land reform reach the intended beneficiaries.
- Another important programme for driving change in the sector is Blended Finance. DALRRD has been driving this programme in collaboration with the Land Bank and other financial institutions. It must be expanded to reach more beneficiaries, primarily to expand black commercial farmers. As a country, we must do all we can to move beyond A Country of Two Agricultures. We must introduce more efficiencies in programmes aimed at supporting new-entrant black farmers, unleash the transformative possibilities of the land reform programme, provide financial assistance, and give new-entrant farmers greater technical support while enabling them to connect to markets and root out corruption in government programmes. This process should happen concurrently with a vigorous effort to support the existing commercial farmers who are the backbone of the country's food security and job creation.

- More directly, the priority should be on (1) addressing animal health issues, (2) dealing with the complexities and excessive costs that assignees add to businesses under the Agricultural Products Standard Act; (3) modernization of Act 36 that regulates the registration of agrochemicals, seeds and other agricultural products; (4) continue to expand market access for agricultural products in various export markets; and (5) deal with rural crime incidences.
- Beyond agriculture-specific matters, structural reforms of the network industries are vital in supporting the growth of the agricultural sector. Here, the Government of National Unity should support the work of Operation Vulindlela, which the Presidency and National Treasury are currently leading. The urgent reforms that would benefit the agricultural sector include (1) improvements in the water infrastructure and policy, (2) a need to improve the efficiency of logistics, particularly the ports, rail, and road conditions, (3) the energy reform at Eskom should continue, and (4) the digital communication work is vital for rural development.
- In essence, what is required to boost agriculture in the country is well articulated in various government plans. What is necessary at the moment is the dedication and relentless focus on implementing the existing government plans to drive inclusive growth in agriculture and job creation. As they form the Government of National Unity, the political parties should not make this sector a casualty of populist politics. Instead, they should see it as a source of economic growth and job creation in rural South Africa. The DALRRD has all the necessary programmes to achieve this goal, but a focus is required on the implementation and professionalization of civil servants, particularly at provincial and municipal levels.