

The disconnect between skills development and employment opportunities in agriculture

Introduction

Unemployment remains a huge problem in the South African economy, especially in our rural areas. At the same time, employers in certain rural areas are struggling to fill vacant positions within their organisations. This does not seem to make sense. This article will explore some of the possible reasons for this perceived inconsistency.

Extent of the unemployment problem?

The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) for the fourth quarter of 2021 showed that the unemployment rate reached an all-time high of 35% an increase from 34.9% in the third quarter, with the youth unemployment rate at a staggering 65.5%. The unemployment rate has kept growing over the past few years and it appears not to be getting better. South Africa is in a recovery mode but the economic 'recovery' that saw the economy grow 0.49% in 2021 has not been able to resolve our unemployment challenges and at this moment youth unemployment is of particular concern. South Africa remains the most unequal country in the world.

The agricultural sector added 38,000 jobs, but there was a 20.6% decline in skilled agricultural employment compared with the previous year. This is a concern as a reduction in skilled employment might cause a skills gap in the sector.

Is it a skills problem?

A new economic growth path was established in 2010. The primary goal of this Growth Plan is job creation. Five key areas were identified as part of the programme, of which agriculture was one. To create jobs within agriculture, the industry must continue to grow. For this to happen, specific skills are needed. Agriculture has been identified as an industry with a shortage of scarce skills in South Africa. We are lagging when it comes to technology in agriculture, other countries are focused on innovation, exposing their youth to modern farming such as city farming or vertical farming where they use hydroponics to plant. Perhaps those should be the skills, we are looking at developing as a country to make agriculture more appealing to the youth.

To what extent does the education system cater for agricultural skills?

High schools, agricultural colleges, TVET colleges and higher education institutions produce skills for the agricultural sector. High schools can offer subjects such as agricultural sciences, agricultural management practices, animal farming, field farming and agricultural technology as choice subjects in Grades 10 to 12. Often a lack of qualified agricultural teachers and the required practical facilities prevent such subjects from being offered. Learners who take such subjects or go to agricultural high school are prone to enrol for agricultural qualifications in tertiary institutions.

There is a perception that some agricultural graduates still do not have the right skills set to enter the labour market. Could it be possible that the curricula offered at their respective colleges, universities and technikons are out of touch with the skills required in the field? If that is the case, what needs to be done by both the employer and government to ensure that curricula become relevant to the practical needs in the sector? Skilling should be done through close consultation between the sector, agricultural schools, colleges, TVET Colleges, Setas and HET institutions. This will perhaps guarantee that all the qualifications offered in agriculture are always updated and relevant to the market needs. Perhaps a conversation between the above-mentioned bodies is urgently due

Scarce skills and skills gaps in the sector

Scarce skills refer to occupations in which there is a shortage of experienced, skilled, and qualified people, present or anticipated in the future, either because such skilled people are not available, or they are available but do not meet employment criteria. Skills gaps refer to specific, key, or generic skills within an occupation.

Because there are significantly low numbers of students that enrol, complete their studies and graduate with a qualification in agriculture, this puts a strain on the supply of skills to the agricultural sector. The sector remains unable to fill critical positions because the turnover is rather small, and these graduates will have to start from the bottom and work their way up to managerial occupational levels.

The critical skills list was published in February 2022, with the aim to address the skills lacking in the industry and agricultural science and agricultural engineering made it to the critical skills list along with 18 other occupations related to agriculture. However, there are dozens of scarce skills listed in the AgriSeta report that were not included in the critical skills list. Such a mismatch will definitely be dire in the sector, when will alignment be achieved?

Employers are worried that some of the most needed skills that they find hard to source in South Africa at the moment are not listed on the critical skills list. The sector faces a variety of skills shortages. For example, in the wool industry, the most crucial skills include sheep shearing, wool handling, and predation management which were not part of the critical skills list.

Sheep shearing, for example, is not an easy job to master as it can take between three to five years for one to be considered a good shearer. When starting in the industry, it will take about three to five years to obtain the necessary skills to balance efficiency with the delicate skills needed not to harm the animals. Most of the employers offer an NQF level 3 Animal Production course to assist the shearers and this means that unfortunately shearing cannot be included on the critical skills list as they require NQF 6 as the minimum qualification to make it onto the list. Whilst we understand that there is a drive to only include highly qualified professions on the critical skills list, the South African economy requires artisanal skills to sustain growth. Hence there must be a mechanism to obtain the necessary artisanal skills.

The main reasons that were cited for the scarcity of skills are:

- The difficulty to attract and retain skilled people in rural areas;

- The lack of qualified specialists, and ageing of qualified specialists;
- The need for more training in technology;
- Skills poaching in the industry and emigration of qualified people;
- unfavourable locations of training colleges.

Supply challenges experienced by agribusiness in rural areas

During consultations for the Employment Equity Amendment Bill with agribusinesses in a sample group, most rural-based agribusinesses highlighted talent recruitment and retention as a central challenge to meeting the targets for higher job positions in their own employment equity plans. Agribusinesses are different from most sectors in the economy in the sense that the bulk of their operations, including their head offices, are often in small, rural towns. Many agribusinesses are performing reasonably well in terms of employing technically skilled workers of all racial groups, with Africans making up the vast bulk of the unskilled and semi-skilled work positions, however, attracting and retaining employees with tertiary qualifications remain a challenge.

Training programmes

Most employers or agribusinesses have invested significantly into skills development with a focus on upskilling locally sourced employees with technical skills and training. Upskilling usually happens at entry-level occupations where learnerships are offered, training for interns and the unskilled employees without tertiary qualifications are trained seasonally to perform tasks for that period, which makes one wonder why, with so much training being offered in the sector, employers still find it difficult to fill vacant positions? A thorough study is needed to conclusively determine why skilled employees leave the sector after obtaining the necessary skills through various training programmes offered by employers.

Conclusion

The link between skills shortages, unemployment, skills development, and labour migration is a complex and perplexing one in many respects. It does not make sense in a country with huge unemployment and many training institutions to have skills gaps and for employers to struggle to fill certain vacancies. We need to find ways to match the supply and demand and skill and upskill people to address skills shortages in certain areas. We also need to get clarity on why employers in the rural areas sometimes struggle to fill vacancies despite considerable investment in skills development and why certain types of jobs in the farming sector are seemingly not popular.