

# Nampo participants sow seeds of hope for agriculture

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Few things rekindle the spirit of optimism more than seeing a vibrant gathering of industry stakeholders showcasing new technologies and product solutions to boost the productivity and growth of a sector. This is precisely the feeling one gets when you arrive at Nampo Park in Bothaville, a small agricultural town in the Free State.

Nampo is an agricultural trade show where stakeholders from technology developers to start-ups, agricultural financiers, biotechnology companies, insurance companies, agricultural retailers and others gather to showcase new developments in their industries and informally interact with clients and potential partners.

Farmers in this gathering meet all their suppliers and partners in one setting. The crowd is sizeable; it is arguably the largest agriculture gathering on the African continent. In pre-Covid days the attendance was usually just under 80,000 people. This grand event is hosted by Grain SA, the country's leading grain association.

While this year's attendance might have been slightly smaller than in the pre-Covid years, the optimism was tangible. Some were excited to be out in the sunny Free State interacting with clients after two years of harsh Covid-19 consequences. The ebullient mood stems from the fact that SA's agricultural sector has emerged from two consecutive years of solid performance. The sector's gross value added expanded 13.4% in 2020 and 8.3% in 2021. This was due to favourable weather conditions combined with an expansion in area plantings.

We are also in a unique period where global agricultural commodity prices, specifically grains and oilseeds, are elevated, thus supporting SA prices. This means grain and oilseed farmers benefit from large harvests and higher commodity prices. Of course, some subsectors have not experienced as positive a performance, such as horticulture, wine, livestock and poultry. Still, overall the past two seasons have been favourable. Allied industries such as agricultural machinery, and to an extent retail, have also benefited from farmers' spending.

This past week, while facing a changing environment where farming input cost such as fuel, fertiliser and agrochemicals are rising, the participants at Nampo still exuded a sentiment of optimism that bodes well for the food-producing sector, especially in the light of an inclement global environment. The new technological products and other product solutions stakeholders showcase at Nampo are essential for the long-term growth of the sector as they boost productivity.

In addition to showcasing products and technologies, Nampo is a space where important dialogues on policy matters take place. This is in the form of a unique and relaxed platform called "Nation in Conversation", which is supported by agribusiness Senwes. The discussion platform brings together people from various corners of the agricultural community to tackle topics that are vital for the sector. It is also an opportunity for stakeholders to listen to one another's perspectives on issues such as land reform, inclusive growth and biosecurity, among other vital themes in the sector.

On my first day of attendance I had the opportunity to speak on the political economy of SA's agriculture in a room of farmers and agricultural technologists that I would otherwise not find in one place. My talk was courtesy of Case IH, an agricultural machinery manufacturer. The last day of Nampo I had another opportunity in the "Nation in Conversation", where I joined a panel of farmers, academics and agricultural technologists in reimagining the future of SA's agriculture.

My observation of the Nampo event is that while the agriculture and agribusiness sector confront monumental challenges, there are many South Africans who are committed to promoting food security, employment and vibrancy of the rural economy through growth and expansion in agriculture.

In the near term, the government should focus its energies on improving the network industries — roads, rail, water, electricity and ports, as well as functioning municipalities. Intervention in these areas as well as targeted export promotion and releasing government land for new entrant black farmers will help move this sector forward.

Grain SA's work through Nampo and its partners and exhibitors is an excellent service to the country.

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