

THE SOUTH AFRICAN AGRICULTURAL SECTOR REQUIRES BOTH EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS TO THRIVE.

Problem statement

The agricultural sector in South Africa is a cornerstone of the nation's economy, contributing significantly to GDP, employment, and food security. However, the sector faces various challenges, from biosecurity threats the drought, rail and port challenges and a shortage of skilled workers when it comes to certain occupations in the sector. The lack of skills in the sector presents challenges to productivity, innovation, and the overall growth potential of agriculture in the country.

The unemployment rate was at 32.9% in the 1st quarter of 2024, with graduate unemployment sitting at 11.8% and those with the matric and lower qualifications sitting at 39.1%. The sector is highly concentrated with seasonal labour and unskilled labour, which explains why employment in primary agriculture increased by 6% annually to 941 000 in the first quarter of 2024, a 2% increase from the last quarter of 2023.

The skills shortage in the sector is multi-dimensional. It encompasses a lack of both technical skills, such as advanced farming techniques and agronomic practices. This gap is partly due to the ageing workforce in agriculture, with younger generations showing less interest in pursuing agricultural careers and those who show interest faced with a disconnect between the skills provided by educational institutions and the needs of the industry.

Internationally technology is developing rapidly, and our economy needs to catch up with the rest of the world. Rapid technological advancements in agriculture, such as precision farming and biotechnology, require a workforce that is not only familiar with these technologies but also proficient in their application. The current workforce lacks sufficient training in these areas.

Many young people from rural areas, where agriculture is a primary livelihood, face economic barriers that prevent them from accessing higher education and specialised training programs. Agribusinesses, particularly in rural areas, struggle with talent recruitment and retention, impacting their ability to meet employment equity targets. Despite significant investment in skills development, employers still find it challenging to fill vacant positions, indicating a need for a thorough study to understand why skilled employees leave the sector.

Possible solutions

Addressing the skills shortages in South Africa's agricultural sector requires comprehensive educational reform, including revamping curricula to incorporate practical training and modern technologies. Government initiatives, such as investing in agricultural education and offering scholarships, are essential. Public-private partnerships can facilitate innovation and resource sharing between agribusinesses and educational institutions. Integrating technology-focused training and engaging youth through awareness campaigns can attract a new generation to the sector. Additionally, continuous on-the-job training for existing workers will ensure they remain adept at new technologies and practices, thereby enhancing overall productivity and efficiency in the agricultural sector.

Youth employment accelerators like Harambee aims to address youth unemployment by providing job opportunities in the agricultural sector, they work hard to facilitate placements and provide exit strategies as well as training, and support to young people entering and exiting the workforce.

Conclusion

The link between skills shortages, unemployment, skills development, and labour migration is complex and perplexing 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 supply and demand with skills and upskill people to address skills shortages in certain areas. We also need to allow for migration labour where the skills shortages cannot be addressed through training. We also need to get clarity on why employers in 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.

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