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Rooftop farms may be next big thing in agri-business – Signium Africa

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City-wide hydroponic rooftop farming co-operatives have the potential to become the next big thing in commercial agriculture.

The prediction comes from Signium Africa, an executive search and talent management company with a large book of agri-business clients in South Africa and across the sub-Saharan region.

Annelize van Rensburg, director responsible for Signium Africa's agriculture portfolio, says first signs of the rooftop farming explosion are already evident, with black small-scale entrepreneurs in the forefront.

Van Rensburg notes: "We work for major corporates in the agricultural industry, but stay close to all important developments in the sectors we serve and the growing potential of hydroponic-based rooftop gardens in inner cities is the biggest trend on the mid-term horizon.

"Many of today's big agri-businesses began as farming cooperatives that were formed decades ago when farmers banded together to achieve economies of scale and secure sustainable profits. The burgeoning growth of individual rooftop farms suggests similar potential exists for the formation of city-wide cooperatives by rooftop farmers.

"The trend is taken seriously by the banks and organisations like Agbiz, the agricultural business chamber. We expect critical mass in the next couple of years."

Rooftop farms are created when 'agripreneurs' rent empty space on the top of city buildings and use water-efficient hydroponic cultivation to grow vegetables and other crops. Inner city locations create logistic efficiencies as the farms are within walking distance of their target market – city dwellers looking for affordable food sources.

Karen Grobler, Agbiz marketing and communications manager, confirmed the organisation monitored transformation initiatives, including rooftop farms, and was excited by prospects.

She says: "Our focus is on established formal business, but these small-scale entrepreneurs certainly have potential for sustained growth. We're particularly impressed by the resourcefulness of these industry entrants.

“They are often businesswomen with a talent for creating solutions. For instance, some are looking at bio-reactors and solar energy to reduce their reliance on the electricity grid as hydroponics need a dependable power source. They already supply local retailers. Further growth can be expected.”

The banks are also close to rooftop developments.

Loffie Brandt, head, sales enablement, at Absa Bank, says there is “significant future potential for a massive uptick”.

He adds: “It is certainly a space where we could play in as finance is needed by all growth-minded business. Size is not always essential as with hydroponics there is potential for high-volume production at a single site. This suggests commercial viability could be achieved by small, individual operators.”

One highly successful agripreneur, Sibongile Cele, has already demonstrated the growth potential up on the roof.

Her Mcebo Wealth Rooftop Farm has been supplying organically grown produce for more than two years. Crops include lettuce, spinach and herbs. The hydroponic system employs metal racking for maximum space efficiency, enabling vegetables to be grown ‘off the shelf’.

Her operations in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, were funded by the Small Enterprise Development Agency and she currently reaches retail markets via an agent.

She says: “I have an accounting background, so commercial success is important to me, but I also have a social mission. Providing food for the community gives me a sense of purpose. It is also important to set an example for other women and show we can be successful, run businesses and provide food for our families and communities.

“This is only the start. The sky’s the limit for rooftop farming.”

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About Signium Africa: Signium Africa (previously Talent Africa) is a leading South Africa-based executive search and talent management company servicing sub-Saharan Africa.

Website: www.signium.co.za

Tel: +27 11 771 4800

Issued By: Tale Spin Media & Marketing

Zelda Williams 082 461 0689 or Gillian Schmid 082 960 3233

zelda@talespin.co.za

gillian@talespin.co.za