

An enabling environment for Eastern Cape small-scale producers

By Rendani Murovhi, transformation specialist, Potatoes SA

Potatoes are among the most consumed staple foods in the world. It is a common denominator in our national fresh produce markets while dominating the stalls at informal markets before making their way to many a hearty dish at household level.

Yet, despite its renowned health attributes and contribution towards economic development, the present constituency of potato growers remains skewed, with black producers accounting for only 1% of potato production in South Africa.

Development strategies aimed at improving inclusivity and increasing commercial growth among black producers require holistic collaboration efforts and broad-based developmental investment amongst transformation drivers, both public and private. Potatoes SA's small-grower projects are part of the developmental initiative geared towards increasing potato production knowledge, addressing food security issues, and providing tailor-made recommendations on suitable potato cultivars.

In October 2022, four small-grower projects were planted in partnership with the Department of Rural

Development and Agrarian Reform (DRDAR) in the Joe Gqabi district of the Eastern Cape. To showcase the project's performance and taking one more step towards empowering these growers, Potatoes SA in collaboration with local economic development agency, JoGeda, organised and hosted a farmer's information day on 30 March 2023 in Tsekong village near Maclear in Elundini municipality. The theme of the event focussed on a commodity-driven approach promoting and intensifying potato production.

Potatoes SA's transformation programme

The commercialisation of black small-scale potato producers and their progressive integration into the potato industry is one of Potatoes SA transformation mandates, presently addressed under four programmes: enterprise development, small grower development, farm-based training and tertiary skills development.

Sustainable potato production requires an extensive understanding of climate, soil, availability of seeds, irrigation water, power sources, and mechanisation. Most important is overall farm and crop management,



Ayanda Gqoboka, CEO of JoGeda (centre) with Vuyo Seteni, an agribusiness specialist at JoGeda to his right.

which has a direct impact on crop quality and yield. During the farmer's information day, Louis Pretorius, a Potatoes SA mentor, conducted a practical demonstration and interactive session to transfer practical skills relating to proper potato production and management. These components are all key learning points relating to sustainable potato production (Figure 1).

Stakeholder linkages and market access

The progressive growth within the farming sector, and its renowned contribution towards the country's gross domestic product (GDP), requires a holistic stakeholder approach and amalgamation of programmes aimed at strengthening the sector. One of the key values and roles of Potatoes SA is to strengthen stakeholder linkages and create an entry point for new producers.

Melinkqubo Ndabokutya of the Kei Fresh Produce Market in Mthatha, was one of the stakeholders present at the farmers' day. He unpacked some detailed information relating to market regulations, requirements, and price drivers. He strongly emphasised the importance of complying with



On the left is Melinkqubo Ndabokutya from Kei Fresh Produce Market and to the right is Nkanyiso Mahlaba from Frimax Foods, who addressed the attendees.

Figure 1: Components of sustainable potato production.



Louis Pretorius of Potatoes SA explaining some practicalities regarding potato production in the field.



From the right is potato producer Vumile Mzinze with Potatoes SA consultant and mentor, Louis Pretorius, and potato producer and mentor, Vuyani Kama.

grading and packaging standards if one wishes to enter the formal market.

Nkanyiso Mahlaba from Frimax Foods elaborated on their supplier development programmes for small-scale and commercial potato farmers, the enrolment criteria, market requirements, and cultivars. "What is important is to constantly produce best quality potatoes and ensure that your contractual obligations are met," he said.

Access to funding

Potatoes SA's transformation division was one of the stakeholders presenting information on potato production at the event. Rendani

Murovhi, transformation specialist at Potatoes SA, elaborated in depth on the criteria and requirements of the organisation's enterprise development (ED) and small grower (SMG) programmes.

JoGeda CEO, Ayanda Gqoboka, shared information on their programmes, role and plans to develop and harness the economic benefits of the potato commodity in the Joe Gqabi district. Government and Elundini municipality representatives who were also present at the event, presented their developmental strategies that potato farmers can benefit from. Representatives of other developmental organisations such as the Eastern Cape Rural Development Agency and Eastern Cape Development Cooperation were also in attendance.

Access to mentorship

Mentorship and training are effective tools for skills transfer and equipping farmers with knowledge to enhance productivity and efficiency. Commercial farmers, production input suppliers, and extension services are some of the vital players fulfilling this role.

Vuyani Kama, a graduate of the Potatoes SA

ED programme in Ugie in the Eastern Cape, is one of the commercial farmers providing voluntary mentorship and support to local smallholder and entry-level commercial potato farmers in the region.

Developing a strategy in the Eastern Cape

Potatoes as a commodity offers multiple economic opportunities that can address national issues such as unemployment, food security and industry reform. Reports show that per capita potato consumption in South Africa has increased remarkably in the last ten years, with the demand across the SADC region continually growing.

From an Eastern Cape perspective, this is also an opportunity to explore the intensification of smallholder potato production. The region has favourable climatic conditions including higher rainfall which makes it



Figure 2: United Nations' global sustainability goals.



ideal for rainfed potato production and reduced production costs. In addition, limited load-shedding challenges afford the area a competitive advantage.

What is next?

The shared objective of ensuring food security at local, district, provincial, and national level is a central and collaborative mission across South Africa as a whole.

Therefore, Potatoes SA has created new partnerships and strengthened existing partnerships in both the public and private sectors to ensure the sustainability of its transformation objectives.

Collaboration and partnerships aimed at sustainable enterprise development can bring about guided outputs by assisting projects with potential to expand and become economically viable potato growers.

There are a large number of initiatives currently on the ground providing support to potato farmers and addressing developmental needs. However, to ensure sustainability it is necessary to compliment the strength of each initiative, address the weaknesses, and reduce unnecessary replication. The United Nations' global development sustainability goals (Figure 2) should form part of all transformation initiative goals and can serve as a focal point for collaborations.

Ultimately, the Eastern Cape's potato developmental strategy hopes to unlock economic growth and employment opportunities, promote commercial farmers and support a vision of self-reliance and revitalised rural livelihoods. 

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