



AMIDST THE CHAOS, AGRICULTURE PRODUCES, COME WHAT MAY!

South Africa's commercial agricultural sector is one of the world's most diverse, consisting of corporate and private intensive and extensive crop farming systems, including all the major grains (except rice), oil seeds, deciduous and tropical fruits, nuts, sugar, citrus, wine, most vegetables, cattle, dairy, pigs, sheep, broilers, ostriches and eggs. This well-developed and efficient sector is the backbone of the country's economy: more than 70% of the country's rural population depends on agriculture for their livelihoods. (USAid May 2022)

The agricultural sector's contribution can be evaluated according to five main themes: the provider of food, earner of foreign exchange, employment source or provider, source of capital, and buyer of goods or provider of inputs to the manufacturing sector.

Of late, only two economic sectors in South Africa have seen their flag flying – agriculture and mining. While mining has ridden a world commodities boom, agriculture has managed to provide an uninterrupted supply of sufficient food to feed the country's more than 60 million people, despite the most unimaginable setbacks: farm murders and attacks, stock and produce theft of huge proportions, government threats to expropriate land without compensation, lack of police support to contain crime, increasing input costs, impassable roads, no railway network to speak of, highway transport hijacking, plunder and killings, plus inefficient ports and violence by strikers against farm employees and others in the food chain who want to work. This intimidation even extends to the food wholesaler and retailer.

Nature has blessed South Africa. Apart from its extraordinary array of minerals, many not found elsewhere in significant quantities, the South African climate is one of the most favourable in the world. It ranges from subtropical to Mediterranean, allowing for a multitude of farming opportunities. The country's biodiversity and the skills of its farmers ensure that exported products such as grains, fruit and wine are preferred world-wide for their exceptional quality. New methods of farming regularly appear on the scene, where mentors are ready, willing and able to assist anyone who wants to

make farming his way of life.

Beer making, cut flowers, essential South African oils, field crops, fruit farming, herb growing, exotic mushroom cultivation, intelligent soil maintenance practices, medicinal plants, specialised nut production (macadamia nuts are the most expensive in the world and SA's macadamias are said to be the best) are some areas of learning available for anyone interested in getting involved. New wine cultivars appear regularly to compete with the hundreds-of-years old South African vintages which are world famous. There is plenty of sugarcane, and teas of all tastes and colours. Myriad vegetables of all types, colours and sizes flood the country's supermarkets every day, without fail. Freshness is the word for these superb products, so lovingly grown by people with passion, skills and dedication. SA retailers' fresh produce displays would give London's Fortnum & Mason and Paris's Fauchon a run for their money.

South African meat, especially the Karoo lamb, is exceptionally tasty. Grilled over an open fire on a warm night in the veld, with the spring winds blowing softly as they carry their tantalising hint of the summer rains to come, is one of life's most extraordinary experiences.

Primary agriculture's relatively small contribution to the country's GDP (2,3% in 2020) does not reflect the much wider effect this sector has on the economy – with backward and forward linkages to other sectors. Agriculture remains a significant provider of employment, especially in rural areas: many small towns would disappear if not part of surrounding agricultural communities.

Agriculture does not happen in a vacuum. It is a vital engine of growth for the rest of the SA economy. Its share of GDP must include not only primary agriculture but all closely related sectors, i.e. agribusiness. This would include farming operations, input manufacturers, input suppliers and co-ops, food processors, distributors and traders, up to the huge South African food retail sector. Some researchers say these related sectors push the GDP contribution figure up to 7%/10% of South Africa's GDP.

Purchases of goods such as fertilisers, chemicals and implements create backward linkages with the manufacturing sector, while forward linkages are established through the supply of raw materials to the manufacturing sector. About 70% of agricultural output is used as an intermediate product in this sector. Gross farming income increased 15.8% in 2020 from the 2019 figure. Net farming income increased significantly by 40,3% to R124,388,000 in 2020, compared to R88, 675,000 in 2019.

EXCEPTIONAL GROWTH

SA agriculture has had two years of exceptional growth, with its gross value-added expanding by 13.4% year-on-year in 2020 and 8.3% year-on-year in 2021. Increased global demand for agricultural commodities during this period saw SA exporting \$10,3 billion in agricultural products in 2020 and a record \$12.4 billion in 2021. SA tractor sales in 2021 were up 26% on the previous year. Employment increased – 829,000 people became involved in primary agriculture in the third quarter of 2021, up by 3% on the 780 000 long term employment figure.

An international marketing organisation has predicted that this year, Namibia must import 230 000t maize, Botswana 300,000t, Mozambique 200 000t and Kenya 700 000t. It is predicted that South Africa will have a surplus of more than 3.5 million tons. (Beeld 11.7.22). SA's commercial agricultural production is head and shoulders above neighbouring countries, so do the math, as the Americans say! Maize contracts handled by the Johannesburg Stock Exchange in the first six months of this year increased by 23%. The Ukraine war could be a windfall for SA's farmers. This is the game of chance to which farmers are subjected, where the political wind can blow in either direction.

2023 could go either way for SA agriculture. Some experts say it will not be easy for agriculture, but farmers are as usual ready for anything. When circumstances are favourable, they can create miracles. Going into 2023, the outlook will not only depend on weather conditions but also on input costs, particularly fertilizer. Political events are playing a significant role in agriculture in 2022. Russia counts for 14% of fertilizer's global exports.

Others predict a continuation of productive times for commercial agriculture. Preliminary estimates from the US Department of Agriculture forecast SA's 2022/2023 maize area plantings at 2,6 million hectares - above the ten year average of 2.5 million. The yield estimate is forecast at 5.7t per hectare because of expected favourable weather conditions. (Sunday Times 14.8.22)

THE DOWNSIDE FOR SA FARMERS IS FORMIDABLE

There's a downside to virtually everything in SA, and agriculture is no exception. Take stock theft for example. Both farmers and the SA Police Service say they are fighting a losing battle on this front. There are more than 130 000 cases of stolen stock reported each year. However a significant number of incidents are not reported as farmers feel that nothing will be done in any case. The University of South Africa estimates that the value of livestock stolen during 2019/2020 was R1,179,458,000. On average there are about 182 cattle, 282 sheep and 138 goats stolen every day in South Africa. It is now big business, with syndicates controlling theft "to order". Livestock is transported to neighbouring countries and sold. Some stock is rebranded and

ends up in South African cattle auctions, to be sold by the thieves who stole the stock in the first place!

To counteract this has become impossible for the SA Police Service. Livestock farmers, at the end of the day, must carry the consequences of poor prosecutions. It is the Wild West, with no holds barred. Police Stock Theft Units have failed “for years now” to perform their duties. (Harvest SA, Nov., 2021)

SA's precious water is polluted to sometimes extraordinarily dangerous levels. Farmers watch their water supply with eagle eyes. Water is more valuable than gold. The Apies river near Bultfontein in Gauteng is so polluted that its fish population gave up the ghost years ago, while small animals inhabiting the area are dying by the score. The apies (monkeys after which the river was named) fled a long time ago, while pictures of the dead animals have appeared in the press next to the white poisonous foam euphemistically calling itself the Apies River! A putrid smell is evident. The situation is so bad that the Human Rights Commission (HRC) recently summoned the Tshwane Metro to explain why the river oozes sewage. This was a result of complaints from nearby farmers to the previous ANC-controlled council, which complaints fell on deaf ears. One farmer has sued the Metro council for R8 million, while a lodge bordering on the river hosts schoolchildren in tents within a stone's throw of the putrid white foam!

In a recent Talbot report on the Umgeni River (KZNatal) , the ecoli readings from various parts of the river reveal frightening figures. The Kingfisher Canoe Club ecoli figure is at a 17,500 count for 100 ml, the Riverside's count is 413,600, and Mount Moreland Bridge is 33,600 per 100 ml. The top reading for “critical” is + 400 coli. This is the country where we all live, and this is what the ANC has done to a once-functioning nation!

Farmer's travails are endless. Illegal squatting on farms, mob violence if some cause doesn't attract enough government attention, murder and assaults many of which are barbarous and gratuitous, roads with more potholes than tarmac, and a lack of support from an antagonistic government which uses land “needs” as a vote getter before every election.

South Africa has 32 000 commercial farmers feeding over 60 million. France's farmers number 515 000 at the latest census, with 65.5 million population. Germany's farmers number 630,000, although for many farmers, the farm is not their full time occupation. Nevertheless, in 2021, there were 257,000 agribusinesses in Germany, whose population is 83.9 million. In Spain, there are 1,140,000 farms, but only 4% cover more than 100 ha. However there are hundreds of thousands of people directly involved in farming. Spain's population is nearly 47 million. In these three countries, governments coddle the farming industry with subsidies and other aids.

South Africa's 32 000 farmers are performing miracles every day. They are up against an antagonistic government, a country prone to drought, with areas of exceedingly low rainfall and all the other plagues mentioned here. There are even politicians who mean nothing to South Africa in terms of what they have achieved(or not achieved!), who call for their followers to "kill the farmer".

Every South African farmer, of all races, should receive a medal. It is the least we can do to separate the men from the boys, the doers from the parasites, and the builders from the consumers.