



## **FROM THE SUBLIME TO THE TRAGIC.....**

South Africa is a country of polarities in close juxtaposition, and nothing reflects this situation more than the plight of commercial farming in South Africa.

Business Times' (BT) inclusive report (3.3.21) on agriculture says that although official statistics confirmed SA's economy shrank by "a horrifying 7% last year", agriculture and net exports were among the only bright spots. "The weather angels helped agriculture expand by 13,1% last year", says the report, "making it the only sector (other than the government!) to record any growth for the year".

The question arises: what should South Africa be doing to lock in longer-term growth from export-oriented sectors which have done well by us in tough times "but are too often unloved by policymakers", asks BT. "Agriculture makes up hardly more than one percent of GDP but its contribution to SA's economy is closer to 10% if its indirect impacts are included. It's one of the economy's more labour-intensive sectors, accounting for over 5 % of employment". The commercial agriculture sector currently employs 810,000 people and this sector is so successful that this country exports just over half the value of what its farms produce. SA's fruit and vegetables go to Africa, Europe, Asia and other markets. Last year agricultural exports were up 3% in dollar terms to \$10,2bn (R153bn), the second highest on record.

CNN recently reported on a highly successful South African by the name of Uzair Essack exporting this country's fruit all over the world, to markets heretofore beyond the country's export radar. South Africa's fresh fruit industry is currently the largest exporter of agricultural products, with Essack a motivating force behind this success. He travels from farm to farm negotiating these exports. He told CNN that South African fruit is "extremely popular" because of its taste, its quality, the care taken in its production and the reliability of delivery schedules, inter alia. There is a huge market for this fruit in the Middle East, India, SE Asia, the United Kingdom, Russia and Eastern Europe.

Essack is now busy promoting SA vegetables, including sweet potatoes, a new taste in many parts of the world. This success didn't come without careful research and of course, risk. "It is important to know the pros and cons for each market", says Essack. "Each market will provide a different sense of security for the safety of your payment versus your profit margin. For example, in Europe your money is safe, but they don't pay the highest prices. The Middle East will place an order with you but if you do not

have the right contacts you will lose money. Russia needs a very special strategy, and with Africa, I always recommend money up front, nothing else". What could be more rewarding to a country's economy than a sector replete with successes where the chain from production to sales is handled by competent and caring people to whom pride in their efforts should be rewarded by government support!

## **THE DOWNSIDE**

Here is the tragedy of South African agriculture: the producers are not rewarded, they are harassed. The polarities between these producers and those who are relentless in destroying what these producers have built could not be wider. For every successful commercial farmer there is a politician demanding expropriation of land without compensation, but who remains silent or in denial as these farmers are murdered, their stock stolen, their harvests burnt or plundered, while police protection is either shoddy or non-existent. Already more than 4 000 farms have been lost to an insane policy of land "restitution", yet demands for more farms to be handed over to the heretofore "dispossessed" continue. The national minimum wage was recently increased to such an extent that farmers will have to let staff go. In a recent survey conducted by an agricultural group among 546 farmers, 456 said they would retrench staff under a new wage increase. Not all farmers are doing well because of the rains – drought has ravaged parts of the Cape Province, while wool and cotton farmers battled to export during the top level lockdowns which also caused "serious damage to the wine and tobacco industries". (BT 14.3.21)

SA's food security has weakened: last week's Global Security Index showed SA's ranking as 69 out of 111 countries. In 2019, it ranked 44 out of 111.

## **FARM "REFORM" CHAOS**

On 24 March 2021, social media showed a farm beneficiary counting the skeletons and ear tags of hundreds of dead milking cows from a 400ha farm near Port St. Johns in the Eastern Cape. Despite making a staggering R13 million profit in milk sales during its prime between 2016 and 2019, its 400 beneficiaries have not received a penny from the investment. This farm was part of the government's land "reform" program and a company appointed by the provincial government to "turn the farm around" disappeared after a few months. The infrastructure is now rotting, there is no grazing and, as usual, the pump supplying water from the nearby river is broken. The Trust responsible for running the farm is "in the dark" about what has happened to the government's R18m donated in 2016 at the official launch, while a further R43m since pumped into the farm has vanished. The bank account is empty and workers have not been paid for months.

In another instance, the government paid R19m in 2016 for a prosperous table grape farm in De Doorns, Western Cape for land restitution purposes. The production of grapes came to standstill, and only one of the five beneficiaries identified by the government to run the farm had any agricultural knowledge or experience. This transfer is a repeat of the morass created during the handover of so many other

farms, with arguments, legal scuffles, blame games and pure state/beneficiary incompetence as hallmarks of a policy with no backup, no forward planning, and of course, corruption. Taxpayers' money disappears into black holes and there are virtually no reports of anyone being brought to book.

Despite the government's abysmal record of failure with its land policies, it is now moving to alter Section 25 of the SA constitution to facilitate expropriation of land without compensation, a vote catcher to rural supporters of, especially, the Economic Freedom Front (EFF) whose leaders demand that agriculture be nationalised (meaning they want to control it). They will then "hire out" the land to their supporters who are at best subsistence farmers (if they farm at all). The land will either turn to dust or become a squatter camp.

Here we have the sublime and the tragic: South Africa is cursed with the best and the worst.

### **THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS**

Atop the entropy that is today's South Africa sits the African National Congress, the so-called government of a once beautiful country. President Ramaphosa walks a tightrope between trying to assuage the EFF destroyers and his party's bizarre socialist wing on the one side, and the ANC faithful who vigorously defend their status quo on the other. While discontent, poverty, unemployment, violence, crime, murder, farm attacks and other sundry afflictions swirl around this group, they demand yearly pay increases. This is their priority!

Anyone who may have believed the myth that Africa's governments are in it "for their people" must have been disabused of this fairy tale by now. Around 40 000 state employees illegally made application for the miserable R350 grant government provided for poor and unemployed people during the Covid crisis. Most of their applications were rejected, although 241 managed to avoid scrutiny and pocketed the money. Most municipal councillors earn over R1 million a year, but no mind. Something for nothing was on the table, and couldn't be resisted.

Tragically the very sector of the economy that is putting food on the table and foreign exchange in the bank is subject to the most pernicious assaults on virtually every sector of its industry. Farmers are at the mercy of the elements and at the mercy of criminals. Personal vulnerability is analogous with commercial vulnerability. Stock theft is a scourge throughout the country. In September 2020, a Free State farmer's cattle guard was tied up and assaulted by thieves who had arrived a second time to steal horses. They had previously stolen cattle and were known to the farmer. When confronted, they shot at the farmer and his workers. Two fled, while two were restrained by the farmer's staff.

While awaiting the police the thieves informed the farmer they were paid R5 000 each for cattle and R3 000 per horse by a syndicate which was well known to the police, which syndicate seemingly acts with impunity and has never been

apprehended. The thieves then brazenly laid a charge against the farmer with the police. He was ordered to appear at the local police station and, with his attorney in tow, was threatened with a charge of attempted murder against the thieves, and with immediate arrest.

He was ordered to surrender all his weapons, which he did. Since September the farmer has appeared in court ten times trying to reclaim his weapons. On 12 January this year the court ordered the police to return the weapons, but to date they have not appeared. On 16 February the farmer's attorney asked the court to find the police guilty of contempt of court. In the meantime the farmer has actually been charged with assault with intent to do bodily harm, which he denies. "For the last six months, every night there are attempts to steal my cattle", complains the beleaguered farmer. "This happens either by using hunting dogs to chase the animals, or by frightening the farm workers with threats of violence. The thieves are well armed. They chase the poor animals for 45km to 60 km. If the animals have ear tags, they cut their ears off. If there is a ditch, they chase the cattle into a ditch then cut their heel tendons."

Local farmers say there is a pattern to this evil – if farmers or their workers trap the thieves and call the police (who rarely come), the following day the farmer is called to appear at the local police station where he may be threatened with arrest for a misdemeanour such as pointing a firearm, or attempted murder or assault with the intent to do bodily harm. It's the thieves' word against the farmer's. Farmers are harassed and terrorised. At the same time, the thieves are let off "with a warning", and the game goes on.

The CEO of one of South Africa's top poultry producers recently told his shareholders that nobody in the world can know what South Africa's farmers and food producers have to go through every day. Dysfunctional municipalities are a blight on the functioning of South Africa. (President Ramaphosa mouths platitudes that these entities must employ competent people but does nothing to change the status quo so that the sitting incompetents will vote for his party at the next election.) The poultry producer fixes at his own cost the local municipal water distribution system. Farmers must repair roads in order to get their produce to market. The country's once world-class railways are collapsing. Hijacking of transport trucks and the killing of drivers is now commonplace. Farmers and food producers spend hundreds of hours in town councils, in courts and with attorneys. They spend millions protecting themselves, their families and their workers, never mind their harvests which are stolen in broad daylight.

It's a tragic life in rural South Africa and this is Nelson Mandela's true legacy. Why SA's first president should be "separated" from the chaos sown by his party the ANC over the past twenty seven years is a mystery. Those who eulogise him should remember that food on the table every day, for 60 million people, is South Africa's real achievement, not the Nobel prize for political rhetoric and a very dubious "peace".