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THE AGRIBUSINESS ISSUE

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#FFM



FARM FAMOUS

Growing food or chasing likes?

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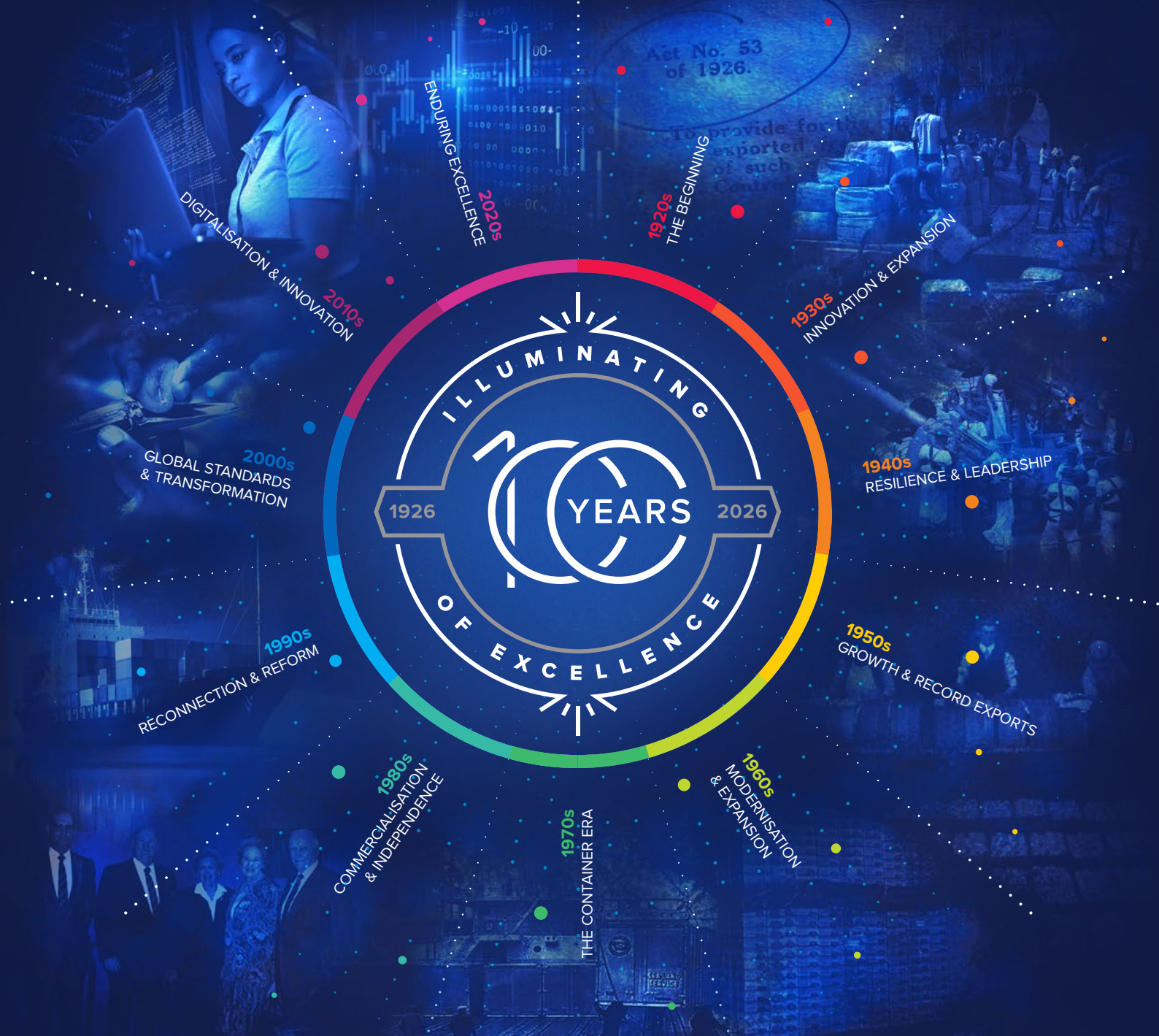
VATEKA HALILE

From Cofimvaba to an award-winning voice for change

ZAMA SANGWENI

More than numbers, markets and money

DIESEL DOUBLED. WHEAT SHRANK. AGOA WOBBLED.
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Along the way, you have welcomed us into your fields, businesses and conversations. Your stories have shaped our purpose and reminded us why independent, people-centred agricultural journalism matters.

What better way to celebrate our ninth birthday than by launching #FFM, our new agribusiness monthly? A fresh chapter for ideas, insight and meaningful connections, driven by our commitment to telling stories that matter and shaping a more inclusive agricultural future.

Thank you for being part of our story. The best chapters are still ahead, for all of us.

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THE FEED

Wheat hits eight-year low

Bread lovers, brace yourselves. South Africa is staring down its smallest wheat harvest in eight years. The Crop Estimates Committee pegs the 2026/27 wheat crop at 1.81 million tonnes, down 5%, even as the wider winter crop climbs 2% to 2.67 million tonnes. Wheat plantings shrank to 479,500ha, the lowest in 13 years. Most of the pain is in the Western Cape, where rain-fed fields make up two-thirds of the wheat area and spent months gasping for moisture. Add punishing input costs and limp prices, and growers planted less. The bill? Imports of about 2 million tonnes. Silver lining: global wheat supply still looks comfortable.

Bracing for El Niño

El Niño is coming, and this time agriculture refuses to be caught flat-footed. At a high-level roundtable at the NAMC in Pretoria, convened by Presidential Envoy Wandile Sihlobo with Bayer's support, climatologists warned of a strong event that could bite early. The bullseye? The grain belt of the Free State, North West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo, with grazing and livestock in the firing line too. The good news: major dams sat at about 90% on 5 October, versus roughly 60% before the 2015/16 drought. The catch: full dams don't water dryland fields, and farmers are already bleeding on input and finance costs. Government is taking notes.

Lifeline for blended finance

There's hope for farmers seeking blended finance. Government has committed another R650 million, on top of R325 million transferred for 2026/27. Agriculture Minister Willie Aucamp stressed that farmers need certainty before planting. With demand outstripping funding, farmers should apply early. The scheme is already delivering promising results through Land Bank, helping more farmers access capital to grow.

Diesel: a short breather

Finally, some relief at the pumps. Diesel dropped by about R1.10 to R1.20 a litre on Wednesday, 4 November, the first decrease since July this year. Don't read too much into it, though. The cut comes entirely from Treasury's temporary R3 fuel levy reduction, announced in the mid-term budget. Without it, diesel would have gone up again. The full relief ends on Tuesday, 1 December. A smaller R1.50 cut then runs until Tuesday, 5 January, after which the levy returns in full. With planting in full swing, use the breathing room wisely: lock in supply where you can, and budget for higher diesel prices once the levy relief ends.

AGOA: Washington shuts door

It's official. The United States announced on Monday, 2 November that South Africa will lose its AGOA benefits from 1 January 2027, even though the programme itself runs to the end of 2028. Trade representative Jamieson Greer said the country's practices were inconsistent with the eligibility criteria. About $1.7 billion of SA exports used AGOA last year, and citrus is among the hardest hit. Mandarins, lemons and grapefruit already pay a 12.5% US tariff. From January they'll also pay normal import duties, and oranges lose their duty-free entry too. This isn't a trade ban, and exports will continue, but at a higher cost. Exporters, the time to diversify markets is now.

Commonwealth farming in CPT

The world's farming heavyweights came to South Africa this week. For the first time, Cape Town hosted the Commonwealth Agriculture Conference, which ended on Thursday, 5 November. Agri-Expo, ably led by general manager Breyton Milford, and the Royal Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth were behind it. Not bad company: past hosts include Edinburgh, Brisbane, Edmonton, Livingstone and Singapore. On stage: everyone from Princess Anne, and Christo van der Rheede, to Dr Ivan Meyer and Fair Cape's Melt Loubser. Food For Mzansi's Ivor Price put people-centred storytelling in the global spotlight during the CEOs' roundtable.

Gulf push for SA exports

If the old doors are shut, knock on new ones. That's the thinking behind the Department of Agriculture's recent working visit to Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE, aimed squarely at livestock producers battered by foot-and-mouth disease. Officials and industry met Saudi heavyweights, including the Saudi Food and Drug Authority and investment giant SALIC. The prize is real, but so are the hurdles. While the region already buys about R21.6 billion of South African farm products a year, AgriSA figures show beef exports down 56.6%, with some Middle East channels plunging between 65% and 95%. Gulf appetite holds, and Pretoria is chasing follow-up deals with urgency.

Namibia FMD reshapes cross-border trade

Foot-and-mouth disease doesn't respect borders, and Namibia has learnt that the hard way. The country confirmed FMD in Karasburg in the Kharas Region, previously disease-free. WOAH promptly revoked the southern zone's disease-free status, slamming the door on exports to China, South Africa and the US. Now red meat leaders from both countries are rewriting the cross-border rulebook, agreeing that sheep and cattle need separate import protocols. Cattle are the tricky part: Namibian animals may need vaccination and two weeks in a feedlot before entering Mzansi.

Chicken's price edge threat

Chicken has long been the people's protein, but its price crown is wobbling. FNB senior economist Paul Makube warns that El Niño, fuel costs and cheaper imports could squeeze poultry's price edge over beef and lamb in 2026/27. Feed is the wildcard: a hot, dry summer could tighten maize and soya supplies fast. Oil prices add pressure through transport, electricity, refrigeration and packaging. And stretched shoppers don't stop buying chicken; they buy less, and cheaper cuts. So far, the record maize crop has helped keep food inflation low. Makube's message to producers is to forget chasing volume and keep a tight grip on feed, mortality, energy and logistics. Every cent counts now.

Grape season kicks off early

Get the cold chain ready: South Africa's table grape season is arriving ahead of schedule. The South African Table Grape Industry's first estimate for 2026/27 puts the export crop at 78.4 million cartons, within a range of 76.8 to 79.9 million, broadly in line with the five-year average. Warm weather has fast-tracked the vines, so picking could start 10 to 14 days earlier than usual. Planted area dipped by less than 0.5% to 19,434ha, and dams in the main growing regions are a healthy 82% full. SATI says growers, exporters, logistics firms and ports are lining up to keep fruit moving.

Last call on foreign labour bill

Farm employers, the clock is ticking. Public comment on the Employment Services Amendment Bill closes on 6 November, and agriculture has plenty at stake. The bill would tighten the rules on hiring foreign nationals: employers would have to verify work permits, prove that suitable South Africans aren't available, and put skills-transfer plans in place. Sectoral quotas could follow. The penalties have real teeth, from roughly R100 000 for a first offence up to the greater of R1 million or 10% of annual turnover for persistent contraventions. To enforce it, government plans to recruit 10 000 extra labour inspectors.

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Amanda Murungi, founder of Renewed Steadfast in Manini Village, Limpopo. Photo: Supplied

AGRI-INFLUENCERS:
Changing the game or just chasing likes?

TikTok fame versus farming reality: farmers have never been this visible, and their audiences keep growing. But are agricultural influencers changing the game, or just chasing likes? #FFM asked the people on both sides of the screen.

By ***Vateka Halile***

A goat pen in a Limpopo village. A permaculture plot in the Eastern Cape. A cabbage-field calculation in KwaZulu-Natal. Not long ago, hardly anyone outside these communities would have seen any of it. Today, a farmer filming her chickens before breakfast can reach millions of people by lunchtime.

Social media has handed South African agriculture something it has rarely had: a spotlight it controls itself.

Farmers are building audiences, selling produce directly, landing partnerships and showing young people that farming can be a real future, not a last resort.

But a spotlight shows everything, and recently the tension boiled over. Farmers took to social media, and to meeting rooms, to vent their frustration at seeing people celebrated as farming's success stories when, in their view, the posting outweighed the producing.

The doubts did not stop at farmers on Facebook and TikTok. Some agricultural communicators, the voices who speak about and for the sector, also came under fire from farmers who felt they had not yet earned the platform they were being given.

The anger was not aimed at content creators or communicators as such. It was about something older and deeper: who gets recognised in agriculture, and whether visibility is being mistaken for the work itself.

It leaves the whole sector with a question to answer: when anyone with a phone can be

the face of agriculture, who do we trust? And are the people with the biggest followings and voices changing the game for farming, or simply chasing likes?

#FFM spoke to two farmers who have built audiences by sharing their work online, and to an agricultural advisor who sees what happens when people believe the wrong posts. Between them, they show both sides of the screen: the opportunities a following can bring, and the costly lessons when the picture doesn't match the reality.

"You can be a farmer and still have personality"

Amanda Murungi, founder of Renewed Steadfast in Manini Village, Limpopo, never set out to be a content creator.

She started by sharing everyday village life: her chickens, goats and fruit trees. Crop farming came later. She did not even know there was a farming content niche.

In February 2025, with around 6 000 followers on Facebook and TikTok, she decided to get intentional. Today she has more than 93 000 followers on Facebook and 60 000 on TikTok, and some of her videos have reached 14 million views.

"I want people to see that farming doesn't have to be boring. You can be a farmer and still have personality," she says.

That personality has become part of her business.

Murungi partnered with the Limpopo Tourism Agency and the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism on the #WeAreLimpopo campaign during Heritage Month. She earns from video licensing and Facebook content monetisation, and her audience gives her direct access to customers who want to buy her produce.

It is not effortless. Balancing the farm and the camera takes consistency and planning. She often films while she works, but editing eats time. What keeps her going is hearing how her content affects others.

Her following has also given her something farmers have often lacked: a voice loud enough to be heard.

When frustration over how farmers' work is recognised spilled onto social media this year, Murungi was among those who spoke up.

She is clear that she is not trying to discourage other farmers from putting themselves forward. For her, a large audience is a chance to bring inequalities within the farming community to light, hold those responsible accountable and encourage better practice.

The reaction to her posts, she says, opened a wider conversation about farmers' experiences and how their work is valued.

"The beginning of your research, not the end of it"

Meanwhile, Nhlakanipho Nzama, an agricultural advisor with the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture, sees both sides of the feed. Online content, he says, can build trust or destroy it, and some people use social media to scam others.

He has seen people steal photographs of genuine farmers and present those projects as their own. Others create fake accounts to push fraudulent business opportunities.

In one common trick, livestock is advertised at unusually low prices, with an address for a supposed farm and a deposit demanded before buyers can collect. He has also come

across schemes selling shares in farming ventures such as piggeries, with promises of dividends.

His warning is simple: be wary of anyone promising big returns without explaining the costs and risks of production.

He uses cabbages to show how easily the maths can mislead.

> ***"For example, you plant 10 000 cabbages, and then your selling price is R15 per cabbage. And then, they will say you can get R150 000 on your cabbages after four months. What they have not told you here is that there are costs involved," Nzama explains.***

Real calculations, he says, must account for production expenses, crop losses and wastage before anyone can tell whether a venture will make money.

His advice is to learn from experienced growers who are willing to share the realities of running an agricultural business, start small, master one commodity before expanding, and ignore the pressure of other people's success stories.

"Farming is not for sprinter athletes but for marathon runners," he says.

Farming takes more than views

Bakhusele Mathupha, founder of Phawu Agripak Co-operative in Willowvale, Eastern Cape, uses his videos to teach. His focus is agroecology and permaculture: soil health, water conservation, diverse food crops and land restoration.

His content now travels far beyond Willowvale. Young people message him asking how to improve their soil, manage water and start food gardens with limited resources.

For Mathupha, views are not the point. The value of farming content lies in what people do with it. He wants viewers to put what they learn into practice and to recognise the potential of the land and resources already around them.



Bakhusele Mathupha, founder of Phawu Agripak Co-operative in Willowvale, Eastern Cape. Photo: Supplied

"Social media can be a powerful learning tool, but it must be the beginning of your research, not the end of it," he says.

He is also honest about what a short video leaves out. A clip rarely shows the costs, the labour, the pests, the unpredictable weather or the market challenges behind the food on our plates. Nor does it capture the long hours, difficult decisions and sheer determination it takes to keep a farm running.

So he urges young people to look for evidence of actual farming, question promises of quick profits and seek independent advice before spending money on courses, equipment, livestock or any other venture. "Do not fall in love with the picture of farming without understanding the work behind it."

FEATURE



Partners in the field: the Mcambalala Maize Project team with community members and stakeholders, whose communal land near Cofimvaba is set to produce about 2 450 tonnes of maize. Photo: Supplied

FROM 50 TO 350 HECTARES:
The maize model putting communal land to work

The Mcambalala Maize Project in the Eastern Cape is expanding sevenfold, backed by mining investment and the security of a guaranteed buyer. It is an ambitious model that promises to turn agricultural potential into commercial opportunity.

By ***Ivor Price***

Before a single seed goes into the ground for the coming season, the numbers at Mcambalala are already worth arguing over. Three hundred and fifty hectares. Roughly 2 450 tonnes of white maize. An estimated harvest value of about R10 million.

Divide the tonnes by the hectares and you land on 7 tonnes a hectare, a figure that would make plenty of commercial grain farmers sit up, never mind a community project on communal land in the Eastern Cape.

Ryan New, managing director of The Original Grain Company, does not pretend otherwise. “Our aim of 2 450 tonnes from 350 hectares is an ambitious target, but one that we believe is achievable based on the growing track record of our farming team,” he says.

That track record is the part worth interrogating. The Mcambalala Maize Project is less a story about maize than a test of whether a particular way of stitching together money, land, skills and a buyer can survive contact with the weather, the market and community politics.

Where the money comes from

The project began on 50 hectares with around 70 farmers. For the next planting season it grows sevenfold. The money behind it is not a bank loan or a co-op facility. It is corporate social investment from platinum producer Implats, channelled through The Original Grain NPC, the non-profit arm of the grain business.

The NPC draws on the commercial company’s agronomy skills, systems and, crucially, its route to market to run the programme. The promise to the funder is unusual for CSI.

The Impact Funding Sum is meant to be available again at the end of each harvest cycle, so the same money can be put back to work the following season. In effect, mining money that behaves more like revolving working capital than a once-off grant.

That raises the obvious question: what happens when a season goes wrong? New says the project carries multi-peril insurance and, for the current season, income protection crop insurance as well, to cushion losses from poor yields or other shocks.

It is a sensible hedge. But insurance pays out on defined triggers, not on everything that can go wrong on a farm, and the real test of a revolving fund is the first bad year.

will live in the community during planting to give hands-on support.

None of this is exotic, and that is partly the point. Much of the yield gap on communal land has little to do with knowledge in the abstract. It comes from inputs arriving late, the wrong cultivar in the wrong soil, or nobody experienced standing in the field during the week that matters.

Closing that gap is plausible. More than doubling yields in one season, at seven times the scale, is a stretch the coming harvest will either confirm or correct.

Funders, and the community, should hold the project to its own number.

"There is an opportunity for organisations to complement traditional social investment by supporting practical agricultural initiatives that create tangible outcomes within communities," says Megan Wadge, programme and operations director of The Original Grain NPC.

For companies, the pitch is that agriculture offers something much CSI struggles to show: a measurable output in tonnes and rand. Eligible contributions to the NPC qualify for Section 18A certificates, and the company says several projects with a similar structure are in the pipeline.

From three tonnes to seven

The starting point matters. This is not virgin soil. The land has been cropped before, and before The Original Grain Company became involved it produced about 3 tonnes a hectare. That is the baseline the team is working from, and the gap between 3 and 7 is where the project will prove itself.

The plan to get from 3 to 7 rests on familiar agronomy done carefully: accurate soil testing, choosing fertiliser and seed to match what those tests reveal, and getting practices right at the moments that make or break a crop, planting above all. The company's team

Who owns what

The land is community-owned. New says 71 stakeholders are linked to this project, and they are the people to whom the money is distributed. The company attends community meetings with local leadership, where stakeholders can ask questions and get to grips with how the process works. What it does not do is decide who gets what.

"We do not involve ourselves directly in the community's internal structures or determine how the funds are allocated among individual stakeholders," New says.

It is a defensible position. Communal land governance is layered and sensitive, and outside companies that wade into it rarely come out well.

But it also means the question of who benefits, and how fairly, sits with structures the project does not control. Transparency at the meeting



Konrad Mandig of The Original Grain Company shares practical farming knowledge and valuable insights with local community members. Photo: Supplied

table matters. So does what happens after the meeting ends.

Wadge argues that the community is more than a recipient. “Farmers are active participants in the agricultural process, developing skills, gaining practical experience and contributing to a productive farming operation,” she says.

The long-term measure is whether that participation produces people who can eventually run the operation without the outside team.

Follow the margin

The money trail itself is simple. The Original Grain Company guarantees to buy the crop at SAFEX-linked prices. The maize is uplifted and weighed, and the community is paid on the margin.

That last word carries a lot of weight. The R10 million is a harvest value, not community income. Work it backwards and it implies a price of a little over R4 000 a tonne.

Out of that comes seed, fertiliser, chemicals, mechanisation and transport, and the funding sum has to be ready for the next season before anyone can call the year a success.

So price risk is real. “All farmers are exposed to the dynamics of SAFEX pricing,” New says.

His defence is to keep input costs as low as possible, so that a softer price squeezes the margin rather than erasing it. The team is also teaching community members how SAFEX-linked pricing works and how the company prices to market, so stakeholders understand what drives their returns instead of taking a payout on trust.



Ryan New, managing director of The Original Grain Company, is leading the expansion of the Mcambalala Maize Project in the Eastern Cape from 50 to 350 hectares. Photo: Supplied

That education piece is easy to underrate. A guaranteed buyer removes the risk of not being able to sell. It does not remove the risk of selling cheaply. A community that can read the market can question the numbers, which is healthier for everyone, the off-taker included.

The bigger test

Strip away the specifics and Mcambalala is tackling a problem that runs right through South African agriculture. There is no shortage of communal land with potential, or of people willing to farm it.

What is usually missing is the chain: money at planting time, someone accountable for the agronomy, and a buyer who turns up at harvest. Break any link and the field drifts back to fallow.

> ***"Food security starts much earlier than the point where food reaches a shop or a household," New says. "It starts with farmers having access to productive land, capital, knowledge, operational support and a reliable route to market."***

The diagnosis is hard to fault. The prescription has a built-in tension worth watching. The trainer, the operator and the buyer all sit within the same group.

That brings speed and a single point of accountability. It also concentrates leverage, and the counterweights are the funder's oversight, the community meetings and how well stakeholders understand the price they are paid.



Moses Mothlageng, chief executive of Implats' Rustenburg Operations. Implats funds the Mcambalala Maize Project through The Original Grain NPC. Photo: Supplied

For agribusiness, the interesting part is not the CSI badge. It is the idea of corporate and mining money working as recyclable production capital on communal land, with a commercial grain business underwriting the market.



Thandile Ntshwati of Ntshwanti Consulting, which leads project coordination, cooperative development and governance support for the Mcambalala Maize Project near Cofimvaba in the Eastern Cape. Photo: Supplied

If it works at 350 hectares, the template travels well beyond one Eastern Cape village. If yields land closer to 3 tonnes than 7, the lessons will be just as useful, provided someone is honest enough to publish them.

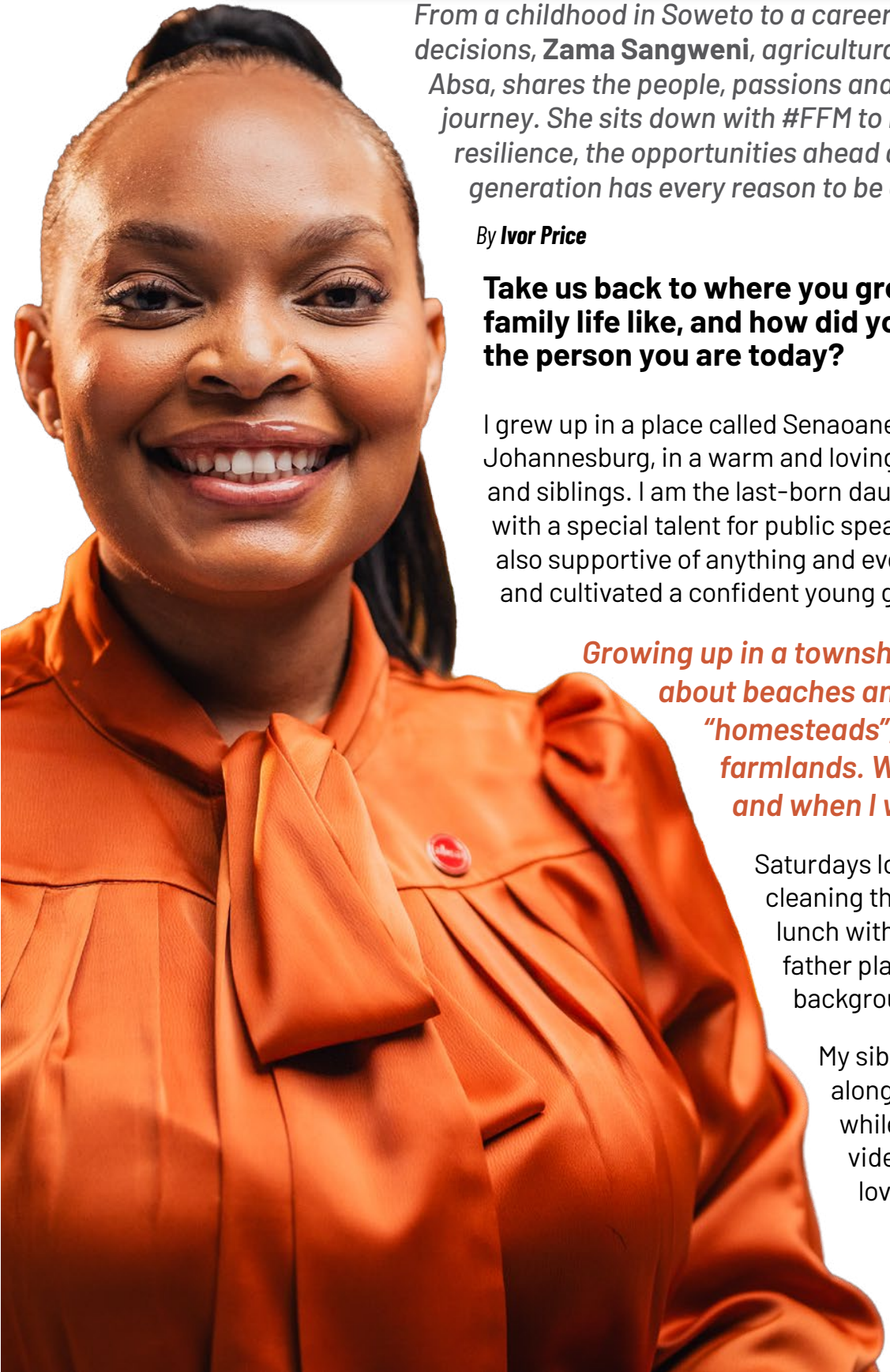
"South Africa has significant agricultural potential," New says. "The question is how we connect the resources, people and partnerships needed to unlock it."

Come harvest, Mcambalala will offer at least one answer, in tonnes.

LET'S CONNECT
CLICK THROUGH TO FOLLOW FOOD FOR MZANSI ON LINKEDIN.

ZAMA SANGWENI

More than numbers, markets and money



*From a childhood in Soweto to a career shaping agricultural decisions, **Zama Sangweni**, agricultural economist at Absa, shares the people, passions and lessons behind her journey. She sits down with #FFM to reflect on agriculture's resilience, the opportunities ahead and why the next generation has every reason to be excited about farming.*

*By **Ivor Price***

Take us back to where you grew up. What was family life like, and how did your upbringing shape the person you are today?

I grew up in a place called Senaoane in Soweto, in Johannesburg, in a warm and loving home with my parents and siblings. I am the last-born daughter of three siblings with a special talent for public speaking. My parents were also supportive of anything and everything I wanted to do and cultivated a confident young girl.

Growing up in a township, I always wondered about beaches and what I call "homesteads", which are typically farmlands. What they looked like and when I would visit them.

Saturdays looked like spring-cleaning the house before making lunch with my mother while my father played Van Morrison in the background.

My siblings and I would all sing along to the words we knew while my dad filmed us on a video recorder. I grew up in a loving and warm home.

Was there farming in your family, or did agriculture find you later?

It's interesting because I was never exposed to farming growing up, yet I found my way into agriculture through my curiosity about where our food comes from. Growing up in Soweto, where you seldom see food gardens, I often wondered, "How do we grow enough food to feed everyone all year round?" So, I could say I followed agriculture.

What did you want to be when you were ten?

I've always wanted to be a scientist, even from a very young age. When I was 13, my grade 7 teacher helped me refine that ambition and inspired me to pursue food science and technology. As I grew older, my interests evolved, first towards microbiology, but then, in high school, I discovered a genuine love and passion for economics. First, because commerce made it easier for me to understand the world we live in, and secondly, because I was really good at it.

What did you study, and why did you choose that path?

I studied a Bachelor of Commerce in Agribusiness Management at the University of Pretoria, followed by an Honours degree in Agricultural Economics at the same institution. My choice of study was driven by a growing interest in economics that developed later in high school, while my passion for science remained strong.

Initially, I applied for and was accepted into a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Economics at the University of the Free State. However, being closer to home felt like the right decision at the time, so I chose to attend the University of Pretoria instead.

Unfortunately, the BSc Agricultural Economics programme was already full, which led me to enrol in the BCom Agribusiness Management programme. Since many of the foundational Agricultural Economics modules overlapped, it allowed me to pursue the same field and ultimately continue into Agricultural Economics through my Honours degree.



As the first graduate in her immediate family, Zama Sangweni honoured her parents by dressing them in her graduation attire for each degree she earned, celebrating their unwavering love and support. Photo: Supplied

Was there a teacher, lecturer or moment that changed your direction?

I can point to one specific moment. I was sitting in my aunt's living room, talking about my future. She had been helping me think about careers since grade 7, taking me to open days and encouraging me to do career aptitude tests throughout high school.

Having studied psychology, she had a great way of helping me understand myself. During that conversation, I realised that although I enjoyed science, my personality wasn't best suited to a career spent mostly in a lab.

I'm naturally outgoing and analytical, and I enjoy working with people and communicating ideas. My aunt pointed out that I seemed to thrive in spaces where I could combine analytical thinking with interaction and problem-solving.

That was the moment I realised a BCom could actually be a great fit for me. It would allow me to use my interest in economics and analysis while also playing to my strengths as someone who enjoys engaging with people and simplifying complex concepts. Looking back, that realisation played a major role in the path I eventually chose.

What did you have to learn the hard way that varsity or your first job didn't teach you?

One thing I had to learn the hard way is that God-given talents are not the same as fully developed skills. I have always been a natural public speaker. As an extrovert, standing up and speaking in front of people has never been difficult for me. Early in my career, I assumed that being confident automatically meant I was communicating effectively.

Over time, I realised that speaking and communicating are two very different things. There were moments when I would share an idea confidently, only to be asked questions that made me realise my message lacked depth or practical relevance. Sometimes, instead of making a topic easier to understand, I unintentionally made it more complex.

That experience taught me that talents should never be taken for granted. They need to be nurtured, refined, and intentionally developed. Public speaking may have come naturally to me, but strategic communication, active listening, and adapting my message to different audiences are skills I had to consciously build.

The second lesson was the importance of being teachable.

Once you become teachable, you become adaptable. We live in a world that is constantly evolving, and success depends on your willingness to keep learning, unlearning, and growing. Neither university nor my first job fully prepared me for that reality, but it has become one of the most valuable lessons in my career.

Who lit the way for you?

I would say my aunt and my mother have been the two biggest influences in my life.

My aunt played a significant role in helping me become the person I am today. She saw potential in me long before I fully saw it in myself and opened my eyes to opportunities I never knew existed. As the first person in my immediate family to attend university, I was navigating unfamiliar territory.

I knew very little about career paths, postgraduate studies, and the possibilities available to me.



She recognised my eagerness to learn and invested her time, knowledge, and energy into mentoring me. I feel incredibly blessed to have had her guidance, especially because she is family not by blood, but through marriage.

My late mother was my greatest supporter. During my matric year, she would wake up with me in the early hours of the morning to make sure I was studying. She drove me to every extra class, paid for every tutoring lesson she could, and never questioned the dreams I had for myself.

No matter how ambitious my goals seemed, she believed in them wholeheartedly. She supported every aspiration I pursued, despite never having had the opportunity to walk that path herself. Looking back, I realise that both women gave me something invaluable.

What is the best advice you've ever been given, and who gave it?

"In agriculture, relationships mean everything. Network as much as you can. It's a small world, and it's easy to get noticed, for the right reasons, of course."

This was advice from my undergraduate lecturer, Dr Melissa van der Merwe, another pivotal person in my journey who effectively took the baton from my aunt during my university years. She not only taught me in the classroom but also helped me understand the importance of building meaningful professional relationships.

Through her guidance, I was exposed to industry expos, conferences, and networking opportunities that allowed me to connect with professionals and gain a deeper understanding of the agricultural sector.

As a young student trying to find my place in the industry, these experiences were invaluable.

What stood out most about Dr Van der Merwe was her genuine passion for developing young people. She consistently invested her time and energy into creating opportunities for her students to grow, learn, and succeed. Her



A snapshot from Zama Sangweni's first job as an intern at a blueberry export company, taken on her phone during the post-harvest months she spent working on a trial plot. Photo: Supplied

mentorship made a career path that can often feel overwhelming much easier to navigate, and she played a significant role in shaping the professional I am today.

Explain your job as you would to a farmer at the co-op.

Think of me as someone who helps connect what is happening on your farm to what is happening in the wider economy. I spend my time looking at things like commodity prices, input costs, weather impacts, and market trends, then figuring out how those factors might affect farmers and agribusinesses.

My job is to turn all that information into insights that can help people make better decisions. For instance, I have to answer questions like, "What do rising fuel costs mean for farmers?" I do this in detail in order to support the farmer in making informed decisions.

What does a typical week look like for you?

A typical week for me is a mix of analysing data, keeping up with what's happening in the agricultural sector, and engaging with people across the industry. I spend a lot of time looking at things like commodity prices, trade developments, and economic conditions

to understand how they could impact agriculture.

I also attend meetings, connect with stakeholders, and often work on reports or presentations that help translate complex information into practical insights. No two weeks are ever the same, which is what I enjoy most. There's always something new happening in agriculture, and always something new to learn.

What is the most rewarding result you've seen from your work?

The most rewarding result of my work is when complex information becomes clarity for businesses. Knowing that the analysis I produce helps decision-makers feel more confident about the choices they're making, and that those decisions can ultimately shape the future of the agricultural industry, gives my work a strong sense of purpose. It's rewarding to know that what I produce contributes to real decisions and real outcomes.

What is one thing about South African agriculture right now that more people should understand?

I think more people should understand just how much South African agriculture achieves despite the challenges it faces. We often describe the sector as "resilient", but resilience is more than simply surviving difficult conditions. It means constantly adapting, innovating, and finding ways to do more with less.

South African farmers operate in an environment filled with uncertainty, from weather and input costs to market pressures. Yet they continue to produce high-quality products and remain competitive on a global stage.

What impresses me most is their ability to embrace new technologies, better genetics, and improved farming practices to keep improving productivity. So, while resilience is a word we use often, I think "outperformers" is just as appropriate. South African agriculture doesn't just endure challenges; it continues to find ways to excel despite them.



For Absa agricultural economist Zama Sangweni, turning complex economic data into practical insights is about helping farmers make smarter decisions. Photo: Supplied

What risk do you think the sector is underestimating?

I think one risk the sector may be underestimating is that future challenges won't necessarily look like the ones we've faced before. Many people focus on drought, but climate variability is becoming much more complex, with unpredictable weather patterns having a significant impact on production.

At the same time, global events that seem far removed from agriculture can quickly affect input costs and profitability. The industry has become very resilient, but the risks are becoming more interconnected and harder to predict.

Where do you see the biggest opportunity for agribusiness in the next five years?

I believe the biggest opportunity for agribusiness in the next five years lies in creating more value from what we already produce. We actually have to do this alongside finding new markets. South Africa has proven its ability to produce agricultural commodities competitively, but the real opportunity is moving beyond production and capturing a greater share of the value chain.

Whether through processing, branding, product innovation, or market development, there is significant potential to transform raw agricultural products into higher-value offerings.

This was highlighted in the Spring 2026 edition of Absa AgriTrends, where growth will not only come from producing more, but from creating more value, improving margins, and unlocking new opportunities for businesses across the agricultural sector.

Where do you see yourself in a decade?

In ten years, I will be 38 years old, and for me, that sounds like the perfect age to be steering a ship! I see myself in an executive leadership role within the agricultural sector.

> ***By that stage in my career, I hope to have built a broad range of experience across the industry and developed a deep understanding of what drives growth, competitiveness, and sustainable value creation.***

What excites me most is the opportunity to help shape strategy and make decisions that have a meaningful impact on the agricultural value chain. My goal is to be in a position where I can support industry players, from farmers to processors, in remaining competitive and creating long-term value.

What would you tell your younger self at the start of this journey?

I would tell my younger self that you don't need to have everything figured out before you begin. Trust yourself, invest in your strengths, and be willing to learn as you go.

The career you imagine is more possible than you think, but you'll never know unless you take the first step. Let's do it.

What should a young person entering agriculture today know?

Agriculture is much cooler than most people realise. It's an industry that touches everyone's life, every single day, and it needs people with different interests and perspectives. There is a place for you here, but you have to take ownership of your journey and create opportunities for yourself.

The skills you develop in agriculture, whether it's problem-solving, communication, analysis, or relationship-building, are valuable far beyond the sector itself. Food is a fundamental human need, which means the work you do will always matter. If you're willing to learn, stay curious, and embrace the challenges, agriculture can offer a career that is both meaningful and full of opportunity.

What is your one message to Mzansi's farmers and agribusinesses?

Never underestimate the impact of what you do. You don't just produce food; you create jobs, support communities, and grow our economy.

The adaptability, innovation, and determination shown across South African agriculture are what make it globally competitive.

Keep investing in people, embracing change, and creating value. As someone privileged to work alongside this industry, I remain optimistic about what we can achieve together.


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A solid agribusiness plan helps farmers set clear goals, manage finances, anticipate risks and unlock funding opportunities, laying the foundation for sustainable growth and long-term success. Photo: Supplied

How to compile a winning AGRIBUSINESS PLAN

A well-structured business plan can help farmers clarify their goals, attract funding and build sustainable businesses.

By ***Patricia Tembo***

A well-structured agribusiness plan is more than just a formality. It can be a critical tool for ensuring long-term success and sustainability. Whether you're a seasoned farmer or just starting, your business plan can make or break your prospects for funding, partnerships and growth.

Agricultural economist Siziphiwe Jojo, head of business at Agricast Advisory Services, breaks down the essential components every agripreneur should include in their business plan. She stresses that understanding its purpose lays the foundation for success in agriculture.

"A business plan is a formal written document that a farmer can use to outline their goals for the business, basically a roadmap that shows how the business will operate, what goals it wants to achieve, and how it will grow and be sustained in the long term," she explains.

A roadmap for growth

According to Jojo, a business plan should be viewed as a dynamic, flexible tool that serves both internal planning and external communication needs.

> ***"Internally, it is for the farmer to use and make plans for their production, budgeting for your expenses and expected revenue, as well as knowing the market you are operating in and planning for it, as well as the risk that you can expect and mitigate it."***

It also helps farmers communicate their needs and ambitions to potential investors.

"It's basically a document that will speak for you to investors where you can show them that this is what you produce, this is what you need funding for, what it's going to be used for, and generally what they can gain from getting in partnership with you," Jojo says.

Given agriculture's unpredictable nature, Jojo

advises farmers to revisit and revise their business plans annually or whenever major changes occur, such as increasing livestock numbers or expanding into new crops.

While every business is unique, Jojo outlines seven key sections that farmers should include in their plans.

1. Executive summary

This is a concise overview of the entire business plan, typically written last but presented first.

Jojo explains that it should clearly state the business's vision (its purpose and long-term plan), mission (its shorter-term plans) and objectives (the specific actions needed to achieve its goals).

"If you are going to be applying for support from the department of agriculture you align your objectives to things that speak to the department," she adds.

2. Business description

This section provides background on the business, including its location, ownership structure, such as a cooperative or private company, and legal standing.

"You cover the background of the business, when was it established, by whom, and why. If there's any interesting history, this is the section to include that.

"If you are a dry bean farmer based in the Eastern Free State, you can mention that the Eastern Free State is the top producer of dry beans in South Africa."

Jojo adds that a business's location can be a strategic asset.

3. Market analysis

This section demonstrates your understanding of the industry, market demand and competition.

Include customer demographics, pricing structures and market trends.

"It gives you a competitive advantage if you know who you're selling to and what your market wants," Jojo explains.

4. Organisation and management

This section outlines the business's management structure and the responsibilities of everyone involved in its operations. An organigram can help illustrate how authority and responsibilities are distributed.

"An organigram is basically a flow chart that shows how authority runs through the business. So for instance you will have your farm manager at the top in charge and at the bottom that's where you will have your farm workers, your drivers, your security," she explains.



Siziphiwe Jojo, head of business at Agricast Advisory Services. Photo: Supplied

5. Marketing strategy

The marketing section should explain how you intend to attract, retain and grow your customer base. It should cover your target customers, pricing approach, promotion and sales channels, supported by realistic market research.

Jojo stresses the importance of understanding what customers want and how best to reach them. A clear marketing

strategy helps farmers position their products competitively and identify opportunities to grow sales.

6. Operational plan

This section explains how your agribusiness will function on a day-to-day basis, covering production systems, infrastructure, equipment and input suppliers.

These details help investors assess whether the business is operationally ready. "You talk about the farm layout, the equipment you have or need, the production calendar, and even the management structure of your business."

The plan should also address production cycles and practical systems for keeping the business running.

"For livestock, you detail breeding cycles, health, biosecurity etc. For crop production, this is where you cover the seasons that you plan on producing, and you will look at your land preparation, and you will look at the irrigation systems," Jojo explains.

She adds that farmers should not overlook workforce planning, equipment use, waste management, logistics and regulatory compliance.

7. Financial plan

The financial plan is critical for demonstrating the farm's sustainability to potential investors or lenders. It should clearly state funding requirements and financial goals, supported by documents such as income statements, balance sheets and cash flow forecasts.

The plan should outline production costs, projected revenue, expected expenses and when the business is likely to break even or become profitable.

A break-even analysis is particularly useful because it shows how much a business needs to sell to cover its costs before making a profit.

Jojo also advises farmers applying for loans to consider four key factors:

- *Amount required*
- *Repayment term, such as five or 10 years*
- *Amortisation frequency, whether monthly, quarterly or annually*
- *Expected interest rate*

These factors help farmers estimate their repayments and the total cost of borrowing.

She recommends using Excel for financial modelling. "Excel enables you to play around with numbers and basically do all these calculations for you."

Contingency planning is equally important. Farmers should explain how they intend to manage unexpected cash-flow shortfalls through insurance, reserve funds or additional income streams.

For those seeking non-financial support, Jojo advises listing all the inputs required for production, from seeds and fertiliser to equipment and infrastructure.

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ONE INJURY, ONE CLAIM:

Why COIDA compliance protects your farm's future

A single serious injury can cost a farm far more than it ever pays in COIDA assessments. Staying registered, paid up and correctly classified is one of the smartest risk decisions a farmer can make to protect their business and financial future.

By ***Stephan Pietersen***



Stephan Pietersen is the founder of Work Accident Support. Photo: Supplied

A ladder slips during harvest. A hand gets caught in a packhouse conveyor. A tractor overturns on a slope. On farms, accidents like these happen every season, and the financial consequences can be severe.

That is where the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act (COIDA) comes in.

COIDA is a no-fault system. Employers pay annual assessments to the Compensation Fund. In return, an injured worker is compensated by the Fund instead of suing the employer for damages.

The fund covers medical costs, a portion of lost earnings while the worker recovers, and compensation for permanent disability. If a worker dies, it supports their dependents. Many farmers see COIDA as just another bill. In reality, it is insurance that protects both workers and the business.

The risk comes when a farm is not registered, has fallen behind on its assessments or has not declared its annual earnings.

In those cases, the Compensation Fund can still help the injured worker, but may then



COIDA compliance protects your workers, safeguards your business against financial risks and helps secure the future of your farming operation. Photo: Supplied

recover the full cost of the claim from the employer, plus penalties and interest. A single serious injury involving surgery, long-term treatment or permanent disability can easily cost hundreds of thousands of rand.

For a family farm, a claim of this magnitude can wipe out an entire season's profit, with the money coming directly out of the farm's pocket.

Non-compliance also means no Letter of Good Standing, which exporters and retailers increasingly require.

Classification matters too

Compliance is not only about paying. It is also about paying correctly. Workers must be registered under the right classification because different types of work carry different assessment rates.

Packhouse workers, for example, are assessed at a much lower rate than general farmworkers. Farms that register everyone as farmworkers may therefore be paying far more than necessary.

Three steps to stay protected

Farmers can reduce their risk by following three basic steps:

- Declare annual earnings on time.
- Pay their account on time.
- Report every workplace injury within seven days, with the correct documentation.

COIDA compliance is more than an administrative requirement or another cost of doing business.

It is a practical way to protect workers, safeguard a farm's financial future and preserve everything built through years of hard work. Staying compliant is therefore not just about meeting legal obligations; It protects people, livelihoods and legacies.

4 facts about COIDA compliance

- **COIDA is compulsory:** Employers with one or more employees must register with the Compensation Fund, including farmers employing permanent, seasonal or even temporary workers.
- **Annual returns are key:** Employers must submit a Return of Earnings each year and pay their assessed contributions to remain compliant.
- **Workers are protected:** COIDA provides compensation for work-related injuries, occupational diseases, disability and death.
- **Compliance protects your business:** Failure to register, submit returns or pay assessments can result in penalties, interest and potential financial liabilities.

FOOD SECURITY

The world is under pressure to produce more food, yet a third of it is lost or wasted before it reaches our plates. New research reveals why post-harvest losses persist across the global south and how better storage, smarter technology and improved market access could help farmers save more of what they grow.

By **Abeeb Babatunde Omotoso, Abiodun Olusola Omotayo, Adeyemi Oladapo Aremu and Olaniyi Fawole**

STOP THE WASTE:
How to cut post-harvest losses

Agriculture in the global south remains under pressure to produce more food while responding to climate change and resource constraints. Policy responses have focused on increasing production. But what about post-harvest losses? Globally, about one-third of food produced for human consumption is estimated to be lost or wasted.

The problem was examined in a recent paper by agriculture, indigenous knowledge and food security researchers.

What are the main drivers of these losses?

Our research was based on examining 324 studies on the scale, causes and drivers of post-harvest losses across food commodities and regions of the global south.

We found that the evidence is fragmented and uneven. In addition, estimating the true scale is difficult because studies measure losses differently. They examine different commodities and stages of the value chain and use different indicators and methods. Research has also concentrated heavily on storage losses in major staples such as maize, rice and pulses. That has left evidence gaps for fruits, vegetables, roots and tubers, animal products and other foods. But we were able to identify some patterns.

Firstly, post-harvest losses occur throughout the food supply chain, from harvesting and handling to transportation, storage, processing and marketing.

Secondly, there's substantial variation among food groups. For example, without interventions, estimated losses were about 27.7% of cereals, 35.1% of vegetables, 25.8% of fruits and 42.9% of roots and tubers. With appropriate mitigation measures, such as improved harvesting and handling practices, hermetic storage technologies, cold-chain infrastructure, better packaging, and enhanced processing and transportation systems, these fell to about 8.2%, 7.3%, 6.2% and 11.5%, respectively.

These figures illustrate the scale of variation and the potential for reduction. Thirdly, post-harvest losses are rarely caused by a single factor. Our study identified interconnected infrastructure, technological, environmental, financial and market constraints.

Poor roads, inadequate warehouses, limited cold storage and inefficient transport expose food to physical

damage and spoilage. Inadequate drying, packaging and handling add to these losses. Climate variability increases the risk: high temperatures, excessive moisture, floods and droughts can accelerate deterioration.

What are the four biggest challenges – and opportunities?

First is measuring losses accurately. Governments need reliable information about where losses occur and how large they are. Standardised, region- and commodity-specific methods would make evidence more comparable and help target resources effectively.

Researchers, governments, statistical agencies and commodity-sector stakeholders should develop these methods, gathering evidence through farm surveys, field measurements, storage and market assessments, and monitoring across the supply chain.

Second is infrastructure that keeps food moving and preserves its quality. Storage facilities, rural roads, processing facilities and cold chains are not secondary agricultural infrastructure.

They are part of the food-production system. Improved storage, drying, packaging and cold-chain systems reduce losses, improve farmers' incomes and increase access to higher-value markets.

Third is making appropriate technologies affordable and combining them with Indigenous knowledge. Not every solution needs to be high-tech. Hermetic storage (airtight sealing), solar drying, improved packaging and low-cost cooling can complement traditional drying, smoking, salting and fermentation.

These approaches become more accessible to smallholders through local adaptation, practical demonstrations and training provided by extension services, farmer organisations, cooperatives and other stakeholders.

Fourth is finance, extension and inclusive innovation. Many smallholder farmers lack the finance and technical support to invest in improved storage and processing. Price fluctuations and harvest gluts increase losses of perishable foods, while credit constraints prevent technology adoption.

Governments and financial institutions can lower barriers through subsidies, affordable loans, grants and risk-sharing mechanisms. Extension services should help farmers choose, use and maintain appropriate technologies.

Women play important roles in post-harvest handling and must be included in technology design, training and financing. Agricultural policies should strengthen their representation, improve access to credit and training, and monitor how women and men benefit from technology.

How could priorities be funded?

Funding shouldn't only focus on buying technologies. Public investment could support rural infrastructure, research and extension. Development finance could provide grants, concessional loans and guarantees, while private-sector partnerships can strengthen storage, processing, logistics and cold-chain.

Funding should support integrated programmes combining technology, training, finance and market access rather than isolated equipment schemes.

Linking farmers to storage, processing, transport and reliable markets would strengthen food security and climate resilience.

The message is simple: feeding a growing population means not only producing more food, but losing less of what farmers already grow.

Click here to read the full, extended version of this article, as originally published on The Conversation.

CLIMATE CHANGE

With the South African Weather Service forecasting a hotter, drier summer, experts share strategies to help farmers protect their soil, water and livestock.

By ***Raylentia Simmons***

DRY SUMMER AHEAD:
Smart moves to protect your farm from El Niño's harshest effects

Summer planting is in full swing, and in some provinces livestock farmers have welcomed new calves and lambs. But with a strong El Niño on the cards, farmers are watching the weather more closely than ever. They now have a critical window to adapt their planting, water management and livestock plans.

In its latest outlook, the South African Weather Service (SAWS) warns: "The El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is currently in a strong El Niño state, and current predictions indicate that it is likely to strengthen further during the coming months and persist through much of the 2026/27 summer season.

> ***"The characteristic oceanic conditions associated with El Niño are well established across the tropical Pacific, increasing the likelihood that South Africa will experience the typical tendency towards drier and warmer summer conditions."***

For the core summer months, SAWS adds: "The seasonal forecast for November to January, December to February and January to March indicates an increased likelihood of below-normal rainfall across large parts of the summer rainfall region. The dry signal is particularly widespread across the interior and the north-eastern half of the country, where substantial rainfall is normally received during summer."

SAWS has also cautioned that not every El Niño brings drought. The very strong 1997/98 event coincided with slightly above-normal rainfall in parts of the summer rainfall region. Even so, below-normal rainfall remains the most likely outcome this season.

Resilience built on soil moisture

Wandile Sihlobo, chief economist at Agbiz and Presidential Envoy on Agriculture and Land, says the forecast confirms what the sector has been expecting.

"We have been saying for some time that the 2026-27 season will be challenging for agriculture in South Africa and the Southern Africa region because of the expected drought," he writes in his AgriView newsletter.

Sihlobo notes that the sector faces a tough road but enters the season from a position of relative strength. The country's farming regions have good soil moisture at the start of the season, although conditions may become challenging in the months ahead.

"Typically, farmers plant around 4.5 million hectares for summer grains and oilseeds. About 80% of this is rainfed and exposed to

the likely drought."

Farmers' planting decisions will become clearer soon, especially after the Crop Estimates Committee released its report on intentions to plant for 2026/27.

The winter-rainfall region tells a different story. Parts of the south-western Cape recorded their driest July on record. According to the Department of Water and Sanitation's dam level report in November 2026, Western Cape dams are at 78.9%, down from 82.4% at the same time last year.



Wandile Sihlobo, chief economist at Agbiz and Presidential Envoy on Agriculture and Land. Photo: Supplied

Elsewhere, storage remains strong. Major Free State dams such as the Gariep and Vanderkloof, as well as the Vaal Dam, are above full capacity.

In the Northern Cape, dams are at 94.2.% capacity, with the Boegoeberg Dam and Douglas Weir Dam over 100%.

Horticulture benefits from these reserves. "In fruits and vegetables, higher dam levels will help, as all commercial fruits and vegetables are irrigated," Sihlobo says.

Crucially, consumers do not face an immediate food security crisis. "For households, there is no immediate risk, as we have ample grain and other agricultural supplies from the 2025-26 season. The drought's impact will only start to show in consumer food price inflation data in 2027."

Water preparedness starts with people

Dr Lester Goldman, CEO of the Water Institute of Southern Africa (WISA), says climate predictions are valuable. However, they only have real impact if professionals interpret and use them effectively, and act on them before a potential water crisis becomes an emergency.

For WISA, preparing for summer means investing in the people who manage South Africa's water resources and municipal services. Its priorities include:

- *continuing professional development*
- *closer collaboration between climate specialists and water managers*
- *systematic sharing of technical knowledge*

WISA urges municipalities and water utilities to review their summer readiness sooner rather than later.

> ***"South Africa cannot control the climate, but it can strengthen its ability to respond. Investing in professional competence, evidence-based planning and collaboration now can help us manage water risks more effectively, both during this coming season and in the years ahead," Goldman says.***

Don't wait for the first failed crop

Agricultural scientists urge farmers to prepare now rather than wait for crops to fail. One of the biggest lessons from previous El Niño events, they say, is that agricultural damage can continue long after the rain returns. A failed harvest means less food, lower income, less money for seed and fertiliser, and fewer animals for the next production cycle.

Dr Lehlogonolo Matelele, Sithembiso Fakude, and Adolph Malatji of the national department of agriculture, Nompumelelo Ngejane of the KwaZulu-Natal department of agriculture and rural development, and Khumbelo Sirakalala of the Limpopo department of agriculture and rural development say the best time to prepare for drought is before it begins.

Six steps to take before El Niño hits

1. Heed climate and weather warnings

Consult seasonal forecasts, local weather reports and extension services. But a global El Niño forecast is not a blanket prediction for every farm, because local conditions matter. Ask yourself: what does the forecast mean for my district, my soil type, my water supply and my cropping season?

2. Choose crops and varieties carefully

An El Niño season may not be the year to gamble on varieties that need a long, reliable growing season. Consider drought-tolerant, heat-tolerant or shorter-duration varieties. Where forecasts point to delayed or reduced rainfall, consider adjusting planting dates.

3. Protect every drop of rain

Rainwater that runs off the field is water the crop cannot use. Practices that slow runoff, reduce erosion and improve infiltration include:

- *maintaining soil cover*
- *contour farming*
- *mulching*
- *conservation agriculture*
- *tied ridges and terraces*
- *other locally appropriate water-harvesting techniques*

4. Build soil organic matter

Organic matter is one of a farmer's most important tools for improving soil function. Returning suitable crop residues, applying manure or compost where available, rotating crops and including legumes all help improve soil structure and nutrient cycling.

5. Use fertiliser smarter, don't abandon it

A drought warning is not automatically a reason to cut fertiliser.

Poor fertility can worsen drought stress, because a poorly nourished crop grows less and makes less productive use of the water available. Base fertiliser decisions on:

- *soil conditions*
- *crop requirements*
- *expected yield potential*
- *available moisture*
- *professional agronomic advice*

6. Protect livestock as well as crops

For mixed farmers, El Niño is not only a crop problem. Less rain can mean less pasture, poorer grazing and shortages of drinking water. Review livestock numbers, available grazing, fodder reserves and water supplies before conditions become severe.

Sometimes the most important drought decision is not what to plant, but how many animals the land can realistically carry.

Finally, the scientists encourage farmers to combine broad seasonal forecasts with local weather data and extension advice before making major decisions on land use, inputs or herd size.

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THE PEOPLE'S JOURNALIST:
Vateka's journey from Cofimvaba to voice for change

She grew up knowing the soil could feed a family, but journalism revealed how deeply food, power and inequality shape lives. Meet Vateka Halile, Food For Mzansi's award-winning journalist known as The People's Journalist. From citizen reporter in Khayelitsha to award-winning journalist, she believes that ordinary people's stories deserve to be heard.

By ***Ivor Price***



Vateka Halile, journalist at Food For Mzansi. Photo: Natalie Gabriels

From Cofimvaba, Eastern Cape, to the Food For Mzansi newsroom. You grew up in a traditional home in rural Cofimvaba, where writing was your comfort and escape. When did you first realise that writing could be more than a private refuge, that it could be a way of speaking for people?

Speaking up was not something that was encouraged where I come from. As children, we were expected to listen and follow the rules. That came with a lot of fear: fear of trusting yourself, fear of speaking up and fear of standing on your own.

Deep down, I knew this was not how I wanted to live, and it was not the kind of life I wanted my children to experience or the culture I wanted to embrace.

There are many good things about my background that I will always appreciate, but this was one of the things that drove me to the written word. When I felt unseen and unheard, I turned to paper. The paper did not judge me, tell me what I could or could not say, limit how many words I could write or dictate the tone I had to use. It gave me the freedom to be vulnerable and honest.

As I grew older, I started seeing mini versions of myself in other people. I saw people who struggled to speak up for themselves or defend themselves. Perhaps they carried the same fear they had been taught at home, as I had. I also heard stories of people who had experienced abuse but felt that speaking up would only make their lives more difficult.

That was when I realised that writing should not only be about me. It could also be a bridge between speaking up for myself and

becoming a voice for people who felt they could not speak up for themselves. I wanted to use the freedom I had found in writing to help others feel seen and heard, too.

Over time, that realisation became part of how I approach storytelling and my work within communities. I want to tell stories that give people a voice, question systems that are failing them and contribute to building a better South Africa. I believe there are things that need to change at different levels, from certain traditional and rural laws to government structures. Through my work, I want to bring these issues to light and create room for conversations that might otherwise not happen.

plants. That is where my love for food systems, food politics and medicinal plants grew.

My stories included people sharing their experiences of living with chronic illnesses, being bedridden and dealing with health conditions that changed their lives, sometimes for the worse and sometimes in ways that changed their outlook on life.

I also learnt how health issues could change the way people viewed food. Some began to see food as more than something to fill their stomachs. It was nourishment, something that could support their health and something to respect and appreciate.

As I grew older, I started seeing mini versions of myself in other people. I saw people who struggled to speak up for themselves or defend themselves. Perhaps they carried the same fear they had been taught at home, as I had.

Take us back to your citizen journalism days in Khayelitsha, Western Cape. What stories were you telling, who were you telling them for, and what did you learn on the ground that no journalism school could have taught you?

In my early days of citizen journalism in Khayelitsha, I mainly told Kasi health stories, although my first story was about a farmer. Noluthando Ngcakani, whom I was reporting to at the time at Food For Mzansi, realised that my interest was more in health stories than farming stories.

At the time, I did not take urban farming seriously. Having grown up in a rural area where farming was part of life, I did not think there was much to tell about people farming in townships. I thought they had it easy. However, as I started writing for Food For Mzansi's sister publication, Health For Mzansi, I began looking at food differently. I started thinking about what we grow, the nutritional value of food and the medicinal properties of

Being on the ground taught me things I do not think a journalism textbook could have taught me. Listening to people made me realise how some had become used to living with situations that were not right. Some people were scared to go to clinics because of how they were treated by nurses, while others feared speaking out about inequalities in their communities because they believed it could put them at risk.

These experiences made me think about how much people know about their rights, our Constitution and how they can exercise those rights. I began to see how fear can prevent people from challenging the situations they find themselves in. Sometimes, you have to understand what people fear, what they have come to accept and why they feel they cannot speak up.

My work has always been about people who look like me, people who are still unlearning, learning and finding themselves while learning to respect the ecosystems they are

part of. I want people to see themselves in the stories I tell, learn from one another and understand their relationship with food, health and the environment around them.

You came through Food For Mzansi's citizen journalism course, Sinelizwi, which means "we have the word". What did it feel like to go from reporting from your phone to holding a byline at a national publication?

Going from reporting on my phone to having a byline at a national publication meant that I was now telling stories that needed to be seen and heard. This is something I have always advocated for, not only for myself but also for the people whose stories I have told and continue to tell.

> ***The meaning of Sinelizwi has stayed with me in a very personal way. It reminds me that I have the word, the word to speak about things that are beautiful and worth learning from, but also things that need to be fixed.***

It gives me a way to make my advocacy visible, challenge systems that are slowing our progress and tell stories that might otherwise go unheard.

Having my name on a published story excited me, of course. But for me, journalism has always been about advocacy before being an employee. The fulfillment I get from knowing that I am telling stories that matter is something I will never take for granted.

I may not be a public speaker, but I know that through my writing, I can speak loudly. Whenever I approach a story, I think about the message I am putting out there and whether I am doing justice to the person whose story I am telling. For me, having a byline means more than seeing my name in a national publication. It means having the word, and using it.

Colleagues call you The People's Journalist. Where does that come from, and what does it ask of you when you sit down with a small-scale farmer whose story has never been told?

For me, being The People's Journalist means remembering that there is a person behind every story I tell. When I sit down with a small-scale farmer whose story has never been told, I want to listen, understand their experiences and tell their story honestly. Their experiences deserve to be taken seriously, and I have a responsibility to represent them fairly, without changing their stories to fit a particular narrative. I want the people whose stories I tell to feel that I have done justice to their experiences.



Vateka Halile representing Food For Mzansi at an IFAJ media conference in Nairobi, Kenya, earlier. Photo: Supplied

Climate is personal. You've written about how climate shocks hit poor, rural and LGBTQI+ communities hardest, and how disaster shelters can feel unsafe instead of safe. What story or person made climate change stop being a headline and start being personal for you?

Growing up in Cofimvaba, changes in the weather have always affected us. When we could not produce enough food because of

weather changes, it meant hunger for us at home. We ate from the soil, and with only a few people working and sending money home once a month, we depended on what we grew for vegetables and grains.

When there was not enough rain, we could not harvest enough maize to sell and have money for Christmas clothes. Even when we did harvest, losing the crop to rot had the same effect.

Back then, I did not know the term climate change or understand how these experiences fitted into the bigger picture. I am learning more about it now through my work in the industry, but looking back, I realise that it has always been part of our lives. It has affected what we eat, what we can afford and what we can look forward to as a family. For me, climate change did not become personal when I started writing about it. It was personal long before I knew what to call it.



Described as "the people's journalist", Vateka Halile is passionate about giving communities a voice. Photo: Natalie Gabriels

You previously won a national climate journalism award. Which story was it for, where were you when you heard, and who was the first person you told?

I won the national climate journalism award for my Health For Mzansi story, "Health crisis looms as high temperatures hit townships hard".

I was busy with my daily Health For Mzansi work when the email came through. I think I died for a minute. I mean, me? I had won the Climate Media Award? It was honestly shocking. I was still trying to process the fact that my work had received that kind of recognition.

> ***The first person I told was my friend, Nondyebo Mgoboza, who is like a sister to me. I have always felt at home with her. She knows my ups and downs and has always believed in me.***

There are times when I feel like giving up, but when I think about how much it would hurt her, I find the strength to carry on. She has always believed in me, even when I struggle to believe in myself, so sharing that moment with her meant a lot to me.

Heart and soul, every day. Your beat stretches from smallholder farmers to indigenous food and the wine industry. How do you bring the same heart to a township food garden and a Chenin Blanc tasting?

I bring the same heart to my work through my curiosity about food justice, food politics and food systems. This helps me understand that

not every niche will offer us the same things. Different niches serve different purposes, and I have learnt to train my mind to adapt to each situation and approach every assignment with an open mind.

When I consider a story pitch or an event to attend, I pay attention to who the people are, what they are about and what makes them who they are. From there, I look at how their work connects to food and what other links I can explore.

For example, when we talk about beetroot, I do not only think about how it is grown or consumed. I also think about its potential in agro-processing and cosmetics. This helps me find connections between different industries and explore angles that readers might not have considered.

Whether I am covering a township food garden or attending a Chenin Blanc Top 10 industry winners' event, I remain curious about the people, the work and the wider food system. My approach may change with each assignment, but my interest in understanding these connections and helping readers see food from different perspectives remains the same.

The next Vateka. There's a young person in Khayelitsha or Cofimvaba right now with a phone and a story nobody is telling. What would you say to her?

My journey has taught me that there is a safe space for everyone. You may spend so much time trying to fit in, only to realise that those people or that environment were never meant for you in the first place.

Your tribe will make time and create a safe haven for you, a place where you can be yourself without feeling that you have to shrink or silence parts of who you are to be accepted.

To the young person with a phone and a story nobody is telling, I would say, do not be afraid to use your voice. You do not have to wait until you have the best equipment, know all the right people or have everything figured out. Start with what you have and the stories around you. Listen to people, ask questions and remain curious.

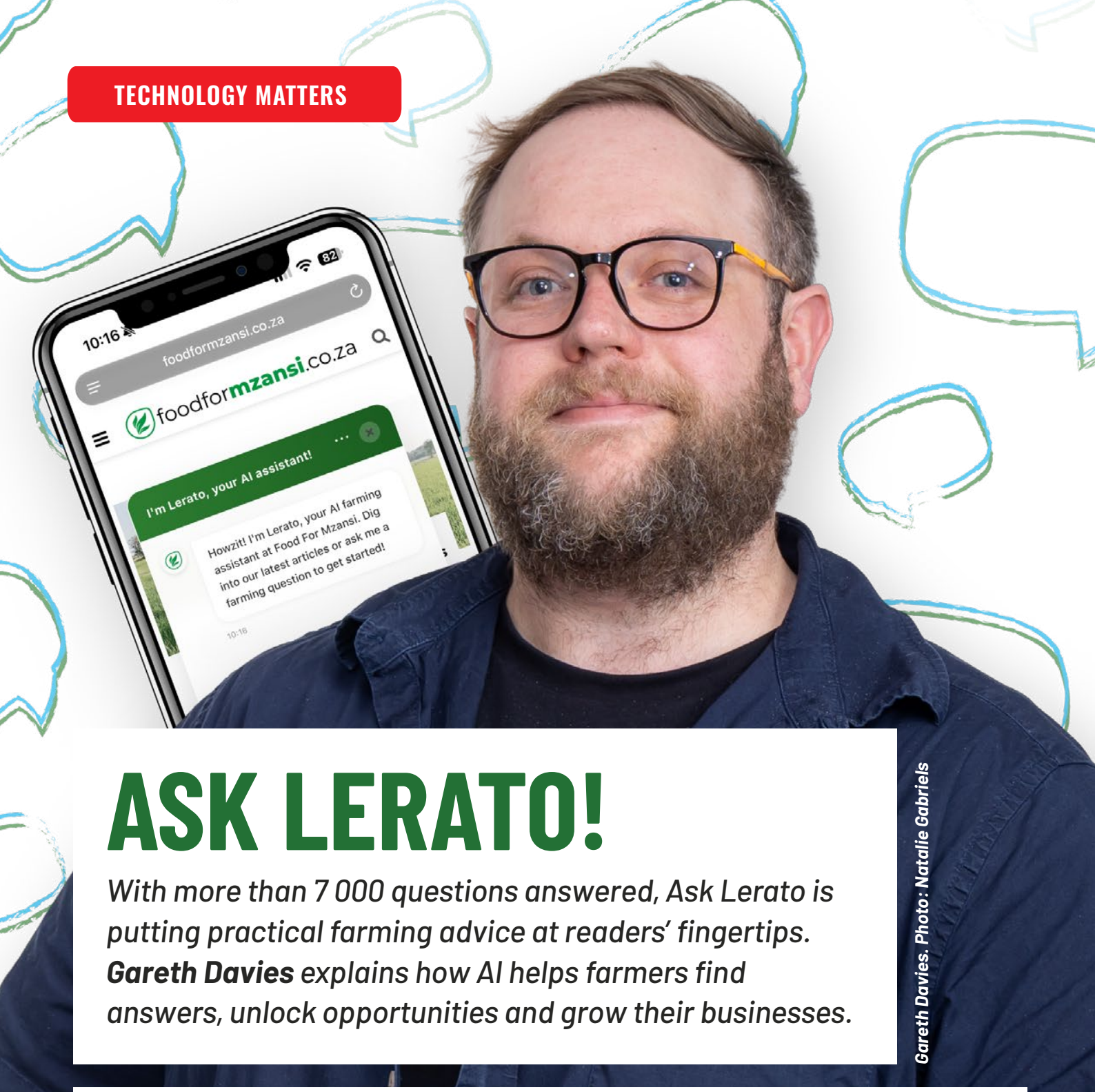
Do not underestimate the stories coming from your own community. The people around you have experiences worth sharing, and you can help bring those experiences to the attention of others. Keep learning, be willing to make mistakes and take seriously the responsibility that comes with telling other people's stories.

Above all, do not let the spaces that fail to see your worth convince you that you have nothing to offer.

Keep going, keep learning and give yourself the chance to find your people. Your voice matters, and there is room for it.

Vateka Halile at a glance

- **Hometown:** Cofimvaba, Eastern Cape, where growing food was part of everyday family life.
- **Humble beginnings:** Started her journalism journey reporting from her mobile phone in Khayelitsha.
- **Big win:** National Climate Media Award winner for her reporting on extreme heat in townships.
- **Passion projects:** Food justice, indigenous plants, food politics and the link between food and health.
- **Versatile storyteller:** Equally at home reporting from a township food garden or attending a Chenin Blanc wine tasting.



ASK LERATO!

With more than 7 000 questions answered, Ask Lerato is putting practical farming advice at readers' fingertips. ***Gareth Davies*** *explains how AI helps farmers find answers, unlock opportunities and grow their businesses.*

Gareth Davies. Photo: Natalie Gabriels

You're the Head of Product and User Experience at Food For Mzansi. But who are you when you're not building digital products, and what sparked your interest in using technology to solve everyday problems?

When I'm out of the office, I'm someone who just loves figuring out how things tick and how to make life a little easier for people. I've always believed that technology shouldn't feel like "technology". It should just feel like a helpful tool, like a good tractor or a reliable spade.

What sparked my interest was seeing the disconnect between incredibly powerful digital tools and the people who actually need them on the ground.

I wanted to build bridges between complex systems and everyday people, especially in agriculture, where a simple, timely piece of advice can save a crop or launch a business.

Food For Mzansi has created Ask Lerato, an AI-powered chatbot that helps farmers and agripreneurs find practical answers to their questions. Where did the idea come from, and what gap were you hoping to fill?

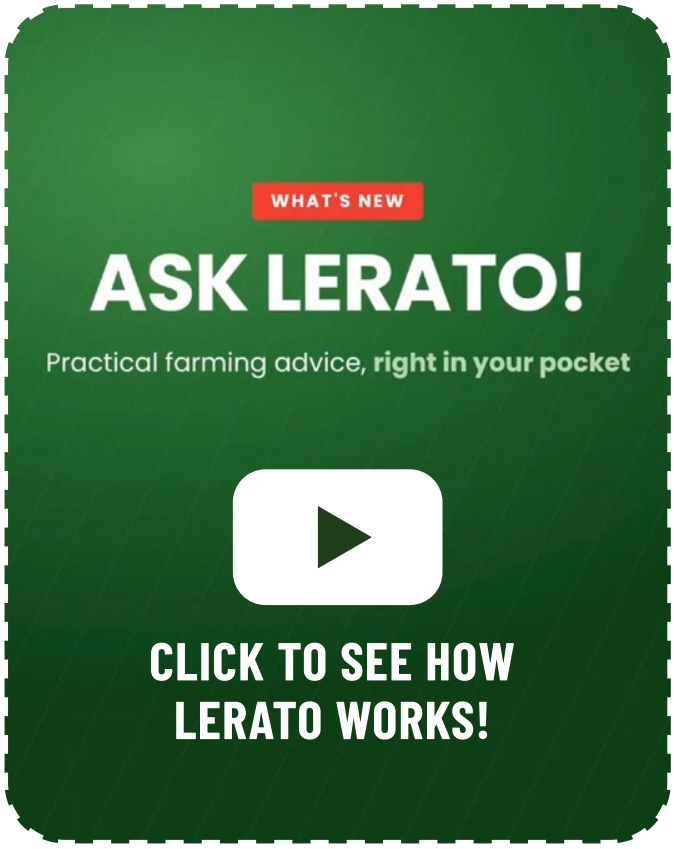
The idea was born out of a very simple reality: farmers don't sit at desks.

They are out in the field, their hands are in the soil, and when they have a problem, they don't have time to wade through hundreds of Google Search results or read a 40-page PDF.

We have this massive, incredibly rich archive of trusted editorial content at Food For Mzansi, but we needed a way to put that knowledge directly into a farmer's pocket.

Ask Lerato fills that gap. It's like having an agricultural expert standing right next to you in the field, ready to give you a quick, reliable answer exactly when you need it.

You've already received more than 7 000 questions from readers. What are people asking Lerato, and have any of those questions surprised you?



Looking at the data, the biggest themes are incredibly practical. By far, the most common questions revolve around starting up and finding funding.

People are constantly asking how to write business plans, how to apply for grants, and how to access land.

We also get a massive number of questions about poultry farming, soil health, and irrigation.

What surprised me the most is the sheer range of the questions! On one hand, we get highly technical, export-level questions, like asking for the exact maximum residue limits for pesticides on grapes exported to the EU.

On the other extreme, people treat Lerato like a real friend, popping in to just say "Hi Lerato!" or asking if the bot can help them find a job, an agricultural mentor, or a local extension officer. It shows that people really trust it for valuable advice.

Imagine you're a farmer who wants to expand your business but doesn't know where to start. How could Lerato help you turn that ambition into a practical plan?

Lerato is fantastic at breaking big, overwhelming goals into bite-sized pieces. If you say, "I want to expand my farm," Lerato won't just throw a generic encyclopaedia at you.

It'll pull from our archives to give you step-by-step guidance on how to write an agricultural business plan, what local funders are currently looking for, and how to research market demands.

It acts as a sounding board: you can ask it for templates, tips on scaling up safely, and it will even link you directly to the source articles on our site so you can read up in detail.

From farming tips and funding opportunities to finding markets and growing a business, what can people ask Lerato? Is there such a thing as a question that's too big or too small?

There is absolutely no question too big or too small! You can ask Lerato something as simple as, "How do I test my soil in my back garden?" to something as complex as, "What are the benefits of integrating regenerative farming practices in South Africa?"

The beauty of Lerato is that it meets you exactly where you are. Whether you're growing cabbages in a small back garden in an RDP housing setup or running a large commercial feed mill.

AI can sometimes get things wrong. How can farmers make sure they're getting reliable information from Lerato and Food For Mzansi, especially when important business or farming decisions are at stake?

This was our number one priority when building it. Lerato doesn't just guess or pull random facts from the open internet: it is strictly "fenced in" to only use vetted, published articles from Food For Mzansi. We've also built in hard safety rules.

For example, it is explicitly instructed never to diagnose a livestock disease, prescribe chemicals, or give legal and financial advice.

Instead, it will provide general, safe context and advise the farmer to consult a local extension officer or vet. We've made sure it knows when to say, "I don't know, but here is where you can find an expert."

If you could encourage every farmer or agripreneur to ask Lerato one question today, what would it be, and why?

I'd tell them to ask: "How can I improve the health of my soil using local, low-cost methods?| Everything in farming starts from the ground up. Before you worry about massive funding or expensive tech, taking care of your soil is the most sustainable, cost-effective way to secure your future. Lerato has some brilliant, practical insights from our archives on regenerative agriculture and soil health that anyone can start applying today.



Kobus Louwrens, Executive Director: Strategy, Finance and Growth at Food For Mzansi. Photo: Supplied

PUNCHING ABOVE OUR WEIGHT:
WHAT AI TAUGHT FOOD FOR MZANSI

Selected from more than 200 newsrooms worldwide for the International Press Institute's Global AI Accelerator for Media, Food For Mzansi gained a front-row seat to the future of journalism. ***Kobus Louwrens*** *shares what the experience taught him about AI, innovation and why small newsrooms can achieve big things.*

Food For Mzansi was one of a handful of organisations picked for a global AI programme. What was it, and what did you get out of it?

We had weekly one-on-one mentoring sessions with Krum Arnaudov, lead data scientist at the Financial Times (FT) in London, learning so much about building AI tools and wrangling the unpredictable beast that is generative AI.

All in all, it was a fast-tracked masterclass in understanding what AI can do, how to put guardrails in place to protect against its risks, and how to build sophisticated tools and automations that can help a small team like ours punch well above its weight.

If you had to name one shift in thinking from this project that any agricultural business could act on today, what would it be?

Part of what makes AI so powerful is that it democratises, to an extent, access to the kinds of technological solutions that would previously have been out of reach for smaller newsrooms. The shift in mindset is realising that we can now build many of these tools ourselves.

What was the hardest lesson the project taught you about introducing new technology to a team, and how did it change your approach?

One of the biggest lessons we learnt during the implementation of our project was the importance of bringing the rest of the team along on the journey.

People don't trust solutions they don't understand and will often resist using them.

We also discovered that tools can be much simpler and more effective when you involve people from the outset and ask for their insights into the problems you're trying to solve.

You worked alongside teams from around the world. What did that experience show you about what African organisations can achieve without big budgets?

Being in the company of so many talented journalists and media product specialists from mission-driven, independent media organisations like Food For Mzansi reminded me of the energy that comes from people solving important problems without the luxury of lavish budgets or endless resources.

Passion and ingenuity really are a world-changing combination. Add funding to the mix, and see the magic happen.

AI is the talk of every boardroom and farmers' day right now. What's your advice to agribusiness leaders who are curious but cautious?

There's no such thing as safe AI.

However, don't let that stop you from figuring out how to harness it to help amplify your efforts.

Be very clear about your guardrails and what you are NOT willing to let AI do for you.



FARMER FOCUS

Four young farmers. Four provinces. One gathering that changed the way they farm. As early-bird tickets for the 2027 Mzansi Young Farmers Indaba go on sale, #FFM catches up with indaba alumni who turned two days in a conference hall into funding, markets and a whole new mindset.

By ***Vateka Halile and Patricia Tembo***

FROM INFORMAL TO FUNDED:

GRAB YOUR EARLY-BIRD TICKET TO 2027 MZANSI YOUNG FARMERS INDABA FARMERS INDABA



Ask any farmer and they will tell you: the hardest part of farming isn't always in the field. You can raise a healthy herd and coax a beautiful crop out of stubborn soil, and still get stuck – because the bank wants a business plan, the buyer wants consistent volumes and the funder wants records you never knew you had to keep.

That gap between growing food and growing a business is exactly where the Mzansi Young Farmers Indaba lives. Since its first edition in Jozi in 2022, the gathering has grown into a two-day pressure cooker of ideas, deals and connections, drawing more than 2 000 young farmers, agro-processors and industry heavyweights every year.

On Wednesday, 31 March and Thursday, 1 April 2027, it's back – this time at the University of Pretoria's Hatfield campus, with a sharp focus on regenerative agriculture, climate change, and unlocking market access.

But don't take our word for what the indaba can do. Take theirs.

Zimbili Mfusi: From passion to paperwork (and payday)

Zimbili Mfusi didn't come to the 2024 indaba as a spectator. The founder of Mphezulu Farm, a livestock and crop operation in Wakkerstroom, Mpumalanga, took the stage as a panellist and spent every minute off it hunting for answers.

How do you become fundable? How do you crack markets? How do you turn a farm that feeds a family into a business that feeds a region?

She found her answer, and it wasn't the one she expected.

> ***"The Mzansi Young Farmers indaba taught me that passion alone is not enough; structure is," says Mfusi.***



Zimbili Mfusi, a farmer from Mpumalanga. Photo: Supplied

So she got structured. She formalised her business, tightened her recordkeeping and learned how to pitch. Then she landed funding from Mpumalanga's department of economic development and tourism for her meat processing project – a project that has since leapt from the drawing board into implementation, laying the groundwork for herd expansion and commercialisation.

When she returned to #FFMIndaba in 2026, she came back as living proof of what those lessons can do. And the people she met along the way haven't gone anywhere: they still bring her mentorship, market information and opportunities to collaborate with fellow young farmers.

Her advice for those planning on attending their first Mzansi Young Farmers Indaba in 2027? Arrive with an open mind and a willingness to learn how to position your farm for growth.

"It is not an event, it is an investment in your farming business," she says. "It turned my farming journey from informal to funded."

Kamogelo Thobejane: Built on a student allowance, built to last

Some farmers start with an inheritance. Kamogelo Thobejane started with his student allowance.

In 2021, the young poultry farmer from Serishane, Limpopo, put his savings to work and launched Kamo's Farming Enterprise. Armed with a background in animal production and agricultural management, he now turns out batches of 100 chickens every few weeks to keep up with demand across the province.



Patricia Tembo from Food For Mzansi and Limpopo fafrmer Kamogelo Thobejane. Photo: Supplied

It hasn't been smooth. Load shedding bit hard and processing facilities are thin on the ground. But Thobejane isn't the type to fold.

As a Youth in Agriculture and Rural Development (Yard) leader, he is on a mission bigger than his own coops: empowering

aspiring farmers and creating jobs in his community.

His first #FFMIndaba, in 2026, delivered on several fronts at once. He calls it "informative and inspiring", and the receipts back him up. He left understanding why insuring crops and livestock against unexpected losses is non-negotiable.

He swapped ideas with farmers from sectors far beyond poultry. He tracked down representatives of the South African Agricultural Awards and got clarity on his next steps after his application was approved. And a Land Bank presentation demystified the funding requirements and documents he'll need when applying for finance.

Insurance, networks, awards and funding – all in two days.

"Overall, the Mzansi Young Farmers Indaba equipped me with valuable knowledge and connections that I believe will help me grow Kamos Farming Enterprise and become a better farmer," Thobejane says.

Keotshepile Pelesa: Thinking beyond the harvest

For Keotshepile Pelesa, one annual #FFMIndaba wasn't enough. The livestock farmer from Dinokana in North West, founder of Pelesa Farming, attended in both 2023 and 2024 while building up his horticulture and small stock operations.



North West farmer Keotshepile Pelesa. Photo: Supplied

He came to learn from experienced farmers, to connect with other young people in agriculture and to figure out how to turn his farming enterprise into a business that lasts. What he discovered reshaped his thinking: production is only one piece of the puzzle.

Business management, market access and partnerships are what really drive growth.

> ***"The Mzansi Young Farmers Indaba helped me understand the importance of planning for growth, seeking opportunities, and building relationships with people in the agricultural sector," says Pelesa.***

Since then, he has been stacking up practical experience and knowledge in service of a bold vision: a seedling nursery that supports smallholder farmers and community gardens. Beyond that, he has his sights set on expanding Pelesa Farming, boosting production and market access, and eventually moving up the value chain into processing and packaging.

His message to first-timers is blunt – and worth writing on the first page of your notebook.

"Do not attend only to listen; attend with the intention of applying what you learn to your own farming journey," he says.

Kealeboga Rapulana: A grandmother's legacy, a generation's mission

Kealeboga Rapulana's farming story begins with her grandmother. Today, the agriculture graduate from Mahikeng, North West, is writing the next chapter as co-founder of tsa Zadisha, growing spinach and cabbage for fresh produce markets while opening doors for other young people.

She is also completing her internship with the department of agriculture in Brits –

and dreaming big. Think practical farming opportunities for agricultural students. Think an agritourism hub with a farm-to-table restaurant.

Her first #FFMIndaba, in 2026, was a revelation about just how many people share her ambitions.



Agbiz chief economist Wandile Sihlobo and North West farmer Kealeboga Rapulana. Photo: Supplied

> ***"My biggest takeaway from the indaba was that there actually are a lot of young farmers in Mzansi and that if we were given enough resources and were able to work in collaboration, we could tackle the country's food insecurity and reduce the country's average age of a farmer," she says.***

Rapulana sees young farmers as far more than producers. Help them commercialise, she argues, and they could drive progress on several sustainable development goals at once – from ending hunger and creating jobs to building sustainable cities and widening access to education.

And she has a rallying cry for her generation. "As Mzansi's young farmers, we could take the country back and ensure it is well-governed, as the country's only as poor as its stomach, controlled by those that feed it."

Your turn?
Early-bird tickets now available

Four farmers. Four very different journeys. One common thread: they showed up, they took notes, and then they took action. The 2027 Mzansi Young Farmers Indaba is your chance to do the same. Here's what's waiting:

- **When:** Wed. 31 March to Thu. 1 April 2027
- **Where:** University of Pretoria, Hatfield campus, Pretoria
- **Who you'll meet:** funders, financiers, insurers, agritech innovators, buyers and thousands of fellow young farmers, all under one roof

Early-bird tickets are now on sale at R595 for a two-day pass. They are limited, and if past years are anything to go by, they won't hang around. Book now at farmingindaba.com.

Mfusi said it best: this isn't an event. It's an investment. Secure your seat.



THE BAKKIE THAT BREWS A STORM

BYD's Shark 6 is the most powerful bakkie you can buy in South Africa. It is also the only one in the yard likely to run your coffee machine. We asked whether a plug-in hybrid belongs on the farm, or just at the farmers' market.

Picture it. It is 05:40 on a Saturday in the Paarl valley of the Western Cape. Mist still sits on the vineyards, the market stall needs setting up before the early crowd, and someone has forgotten the extension cord.

Again. In most bakkies, that is a problem. In the BYD Shark 6, it is a party trick.



BYD's Shark 6 brings serious horsepower and plug-in hybrid technology to the bakkie market. Photo: Supplied

Plug the espresso machine into the bakkie and it does what a decade of load-shedding taught South Africans not to expect: it delivers power, on demand, without a generator coughing in the background.

That, more than the headline numbers, is why the Shark earns a place in the first issue of #FFM. Yes, it is fast. Ridiculously fast, for a double cab. But the more interesting story is what it says about where the farm vehicle is heading.

Meet the newcomer

BYD is the Chinese giant that has quietly become one of the biggest carmakers on the planet. The Shark 6 is its first bakkie. It went on sale here in April 2025 as South Africa's first plug-in hybrid double cab, and 18 months later it is no longer a curiosity. Well over a hundred are listed on AutoTrader at any given time, and BYD has since added a second, even punchier version. The recipe is simple to explain, even if the engineering is not.

A 1.5-litre turbo petrol engine works alongside an electric motor on each axle, fed by a 29.58kWh battery tucked under the floor. Charge it at home, at the office or off the farm's solar, and BYD claims up to 85km of pure electric driving. Fill the 59-litre tank as well and the claimed total range is about 670km.



Inside the BYD Shark 6, a high-tech cabin, generous touchscreen and modern finishes offer more luxury SUV than traditional workhorse. Photo: Supplied

Now for the bragging rights. The Shark 6 Premium makes 321kW and 650Nm and gets from 0 to 100km/h in a claimed 5.7 seconds. That is quicker than a Volkswagen Golf GTI.

The newer Shark 6 Performance pushes output to 350kW and 700Nm. For context, the Ford Ranger Raptor, long the king of the bakkie braai-side argument, makes 292kW. In other words, the fastest thing on the farm road is no longer the farmer's son in the Raptor. It might be the agri-economist in the quiet plug-in double cab.

Why it matters off the tar

On a gravel road between the packshed and the dam, 0 to 100 times mean very little. Three other things matter more.

It is a power station on wheels. The Shark's Vehicle-to-Load function lets you run appliances straight off the battery, with output of up to about 6.6kW. That is enough for power tools in the orchard, lights and a fridge at a farm-day stand, a laptop and a coffee machine at the market, or a few essentials at home when the grid has one of its moods. For anyone who has ever dragged a petrol generator onto a bakkie, that alone is a selling point.

It can be quiet. On battery power, the Shark moves with barely a whisper. An early-morning check of the orchard need not wake the household, and you are not idling a diesel next to the animals or the picking team.

It is not just a city slicker. The Shark is all-wheel drive, with 230mm of ground clearance, a 700mm wading depth and an approach angle of 31 degrees.

There are dedicated Mud, Sand and Snow modes, and BYD says the Performance adds a Crawl Mode that manages speed, power and braking over rough, slow terrain. It will not out-climb a dedicated off-roader on a mountain pass, but farm tracks, wet drifts and corrugated district roads are well within its brief.

There is also the running-cost argument. If most of your weekday driving fits inside that 85km electric range, and you charge from farm or office solar, the petrol engine may spend much of the week asleep. Your actual savings will depend on your charging setup and your tariff, so do the sums for your own operation.

Where it falls short

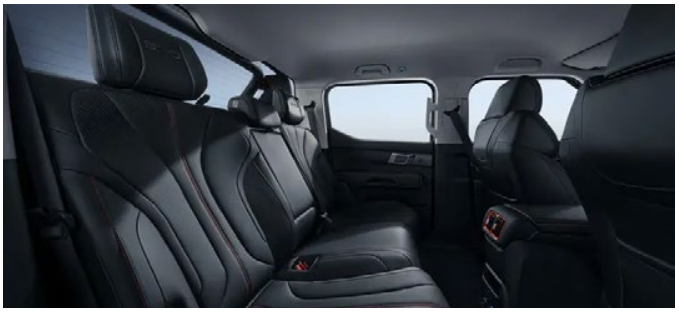
No bakkie is perfect, and this one asks you to give up a few farm staples.

It drinks petrol, not diesel. The diesel bowser in the yard is no use to it. Filling up in town is easy enough, but if your operation buys diesel in bulk, the Shark sits outside that system.

The load bin is a little shy. Payload is rated at around 790kg to 835kg, depending on the source. The battery has to live somewhere, and its weight comes off what you can carry. Many diesel double cabs are rated closer to a tonne, which matters if your bakkie lives on feed bags and fencing poles. Towing is decent, not class-leading.

The Premium is rated to tow 2,500kg braked. That covers a horsebox, a small livestock trailer or the family caravan, but plenty of rivals claim 3,500kg. BYD says the Performance brings greater towing

capability, so heavy towers should look there first. One body, one attitude. There is no single cab and no basic workhorse version.



The BYD Shark 6's spacious rear seats offer plenty of room for passengers, with comfort that feels more family SUV than hard-working farm bakkie. Photo: Supplied

Both models are plush, all-wheel-drive double cabs, priced from R989,900 for the Premium and R1,149,900 for the Performance. That is luxury double-cab money.

The network is still growing. BYD's dealer footprint has expanded quickly, but it is not yet a Toyota or Ford dealer in every dorp. Before you buy, check how far your nearest service point is from the farm gate.

So, who is it for?

Not the farmer whose bakkie spends every day with a tonne of feed in the back. For that job, a diesel workhorse still makes more sense.

The Shark is for the agribusiness professional who lives between the boardroom and the land. Monday in Sandton or Stellenbosch, Friday on the family farm or a client's.

Weekday commutes on electricity, weekend trips on petrol, and a market stall or farm day powered straight from the load bin. It suits the person who wants a bakkie that turns heads at the co-op and still makes sense in the company car policy.

The verdict?

The BYD Shark 6 trades some payload and towing capacity for power, silence and sports-car speed. It comes at a hefty price, but for the right buyer, it is South Africa's most interesting bakkie – and the one most likely to make the coffee. Farm workhorse or café showpiece? You decide.

	Premium	Performance
Price	R989,900	R1,149,900
Powertrain	1.5 turbo petrol + 2 electric motors, plug-in hybrid	Plug-in hybrid, uprated
Output	321kW / 650Nm	350kW / 700Nm
0 to 100km/h	5.7 sec (claimed)	Quicker
Electric range	Up to 85km (WLTP)	
Total range	About 670km (claimed)	
Battery	29.58kWh	
Drive	All-wheel drive	
Ground clearance	230mm	
Braked towing	2,500kg	Higher (per BYD)
Payload	About 790kg to 835kg	
Warranty	5yr/100,000km; 8yr/150,000km hybrid battery	

FARM TO FORK

Ricardo Slawers started his working life with wood, not flour. Today the head baker at La Motte in Franschhoek is the first African to hold the title of Bread Sommelier – and he earned it with a thesis on the humble mosbolletjie.

By ***Ivor Price***

THE CARPENTER WHO LEARNED TO READ BREAD



Ricardo Slawers never planned to become a baker. Born in Riversdale in the Southern Cape, he matriculated in Wellington and moved to Franschhoek in 2005, where he found work as a carpenter. It was a trade built on patience and precision, on knowing how a material will behave depending on how you treat it.

Bread, as he would discover, asks for much the same. This year, at the German National Bakers Academy in Weinheim, Slawers was awarded the title of Bread Sommelier. He is the first African to receive it. Ask him what it means and he doesn't reach for the trophy language.

> ***"Bread has become much more to me than a slice on a side plate," he says.***

The road from carpentry to Weinheim wasn't a straight one. In 2010 Slawers took a job at Sabrage, the restaurant then operating at Val de Vie, and the direction of his life shifted. He moved from pizza to pastry, then on to Le Chocolatier, where he learned to work with chocolate and tried his hand at cakes. A stint at the ICA's The Apprentice gave him his first proper introduction to bread.

Each kitchen added a layer. By the time he joined the pastry kitchen and bakery at La Motte in 2014, he had a broad foundation, and it wasn't long before he was leading the baking for the estate's farm shop and restaurant.

Twelve years on, his breads – and La Motte's well-known mosbolletjies – have built a loyal following.

Learning to slow down

The real turning point came in 2023, when La Motte opened its own bakery and Slawers stepped up as head baker under the guidance of master baker Markus Färbinger, founder of Knysna's île de pain.

The course covers some 22 000 years of bread culture, global bread styles, a deep understanding of ingredients, food pairing, storytelling and even how to present bread to the media.

For Slawers, the challenge started long before the first class. He had to travel, had no idea what to expect, and admits the early days demanded a great deal of self-belief.

Why the mosbolletjie matters

Of all the breads he could have chosen for his thesis, Slawers picked one that is unmistakably local. The mosbolletjie – a soft, slightly sweet bun traditionally leavened with fermenting grape must – is a Cape Winelands staple, the kind of bread many South Africans grew up dunking in coffee without thinking twice about its history.

"In the beginning, especially, positive self-affirmation was very important," he says. "As I got into the content of the course, all those doubts disappeared. At times it was overwhelming, but it was the most incredible experience."

Färbinger's approach is uncompromising: bread should be understood in its original form, wholesome and honest, not as a filler or an afterthought. Working alongside him, Slawers' thinking about his craft moved into new territory. The questions changed from "how do I make this?" to "why does this work, and where does it come from?"

What makes the setting unusual is that the whole chain sits in one place. Wheat is grown, harvested and milled on the farm, then baked in an on-site wood-fired oven. Färbinger says he doesn't know of another bakery anywhere in the world that does all four on a single property.

The Bread Sommelier programme has been offered in Weinheim since 2015 and is open only to bakery owners, head bakers, instructors and seasoned professionals. Its graduates – just over 300 so far, from 16 countries – are trained to taste and assess bread the way a wine sommelier assesses a vintage.

That history is exactly the point. La Motte CEO Kobie Lochner describes the mosbolletjie as a heritage bread whose story is bound up with the region's wine culture. Seeing it studied and recognised on an international stage, he says, helps keep the tradition alive for the next generation.

It is also a reminder that South Africa's food heritage doesn't need to borrow prestige from elsewhere. A bun made from grapes and wheat grown in the same valley carries its own story – it just needs someone to tell it.

For an industry where bread is usually discussed in terms of wheat prices, milling margins and shelf space, Slawers' achievement offers a different lens. Färbinger calls it an important moment for professional artisan baking in South Africa and across the



La Motte head baker Ricardo Slawers. Photo: Supplied

continent, and a chance to raise awareness about what wholesome bread can be.

Slawers is already thinking about how to share what he learned. He wants to teach South Africans to see bread as part of a healthy diet and as part of who we are.

> ***"It is truly a life-changing journey,"***

That teaching starts close to home. From November, the estate's milling and bread-baking experiences return for the summer season, with Slawers hosting them on the third Thursday and Saturday of each month – taking guests through the full journey from grain to loaf.

Back in Franschhoek, he is once again at the wood-fired oven, leading his team with the same attention to detail that once went into a well-made piece of furniture. The material has changed. The patience hasn't.

Ricardo Slawers at a glance

- **From:** Riversdale, Southern Cape; matriculated in Wellington
- **First trade:** Carpentry
- **Kitchens:** Sabrage (Val de Vie), Le Chocolatier, The Apprentice (ICA), La Motte
- **At La Motte since:** 2014; head baker of La Motte Bakery since 2023
- **Mentor:** Markus Färbinger, founder of île de pain, Knysna
- **Title:** Bread Sommelier, German National Bakers Academy, Weinheim – the first African to hold it
- **Thesis topic:** The mosbolletjie

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