

Extension symposium

19 April 2010

Speech by Minister van Rensburg

Colleagues, thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. I committed our department in my budget speech to a 60% land reform success rate within the next five years. This is an enormous challenge, especially when viewed against the national success rate of only 10%.

It is often you, the extension officers, who are working with this challenge on the front line. Teaching someone to farm is difficult. I know. I had to teach my own sons how to farm.

But we have no choice. I want you to appreciate the importance of your work within the larger South African context. Without successful land reform, we cannot have stability in South Africa. If we were to transfer all the land in our country to new farmers, but they are economically unsuccessful, we would only create more frustration and instability. Successful land reform is not a numbers game on hectares and percentages of different race groups. Successful land reform is about helping people to help themselves through the access to land.

Yes, your task is difficult, but it is said that necessity is the mother of all invention. And in South Africa there exist a proud history of successful farmers who were able to succeed where others thought it would be impossible. We need to make good plans today to ensure sustainable success for the future.

And to make good plans, you need to be able to think innovatively. You need to be able to think out of the box. You need to be flexible and adaptable in order to see new opportunities when they arise. This is not the time to dig your head into the sand like an ostrich. It is also not the time to be short sighted like a rhino; confronting opponents with aggression. A negative frame of mind will freeze and disable your flare for making good plans.

These plans we need to make encompass much more than farming. We are producing and selling crops in an extremely complex environment. Politics, land reform, global warming and the nature of international trade are all interconnected and influence us directly. The concept of private property and the perceived link between land and prosperity is being discussed in South Africa.

We will need to think out of the box in order to solve some of our problems. Innovative thinking will be needed. What I am asking of you is a paradigm shift regarding land reform in

South Africa. Establishing successful new farmers is a huge challenge, and old knowledge might help to a certain extent, but new challenges ultimately require new thinking.

A recent trip to Singapore strengthened my belief in the positive results that innovative ideas bring. Singapore imports fresh water, but still manages to be self sufficient regarding vegetable production. Or take the Netherlands, a small country below sea level, but one of the largest exporters of agricultural products, due to an extremely well developed value adding industry.

Yes, agriculture in South Africa does face some serious challenges:

- Political uncertainty regarding property rights and the role that government sees for commercial farmers.
- Difficulties in ensuring that land reform projects are successful. We are aiming at a success rate of 60% within the next 5 years for the Western Cape. This against the current national failure rate of 90%.
- Water. We are experiencing the effects of drought in the Southern Cape at the moment, and see what it does to an agricultural sector. Agriculture will in future compete with ever increasing urban demands placed on this scarce resource.
- Electricity is set to become more expensive with a doubling in tariffs over the next three years.
- Rift Valley Fever. At the moment the Western Cape is still to a large extent unaffected. This can be ascribed to a certain measure of good luck, but especially to our vets who have been working extremely hard during the past few weeks. We are busy distributing and administering 80 000 vaccination units as a preventative strategy throughout our Province.

Ladies and gentleman, but fortunately for us in South Africa: We do not have to import water from Zimbabwe; and we have not disappeared beneath the rising seas due to climate change. I want to argue that these challenges and uncertainties we face are in themselves creating new opportunities. New technologies will be developed. New crops for new markets will emerge. Not one of our challenges is a lost battle where nothing can be done anymore.

Colleges, I understand that some of you are frustrated, because you are working on projects where the Government's cash flows are not synchronised with the natural seasons on which agriculture depends. I understand that you need financing for projects that is in line with production cycles.

Ladies and gentlemen, but we cannot throw the towel in due to cash flow challenges alone. You need to remember that cash flow is also the biggest challenges for established producers, who also from time to time have to go on their knees and grovel in front of a bank manager. As I have said: Necessity is the mother of all invention.

And let us also be honest with one another: If 60% of projects are to be successful, there are 40% unsuccessful projects. We need to identify the 60% that stand a chance, and focus our energy and resources on them. As heartless as it may sound: we cannot waste money on projects we know stand no chance of survival. I expect of you to identify crops that are viable to a client's land. Do not be swayed by people's whims of what they want to farm with. Do not recommend organic production where it is not viable. I do not want to see pigs and chickens on irrigation land.

In order to be successful we need to remember that we are a team. Please do not think of your work in a silo mentality. The Premier is working hard to get Ministers and HOD's to speak with one another and to work together as one government. I expect you to think of yourselves as personnel of the Department of Agriculture in the first place. Your position within a Programme comes second.

But, having said that: I do not expect you to face this challenge on your own. I expect the rest of the department to support you. You have my full support. Let us tackle this challenge together. It is of national importance. I know we can do it.

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