

Cheap imports impact livelihood of farmers

A 65-year-old North Coast farmer, Naren Harikrishna, says although sugar cane farming is his "bread and butter", he is struggling to sustain the drop in income as a result of cheap imports.

Harikrishna, who lives on a 200ha farm with his wife, said sugar dumping over the past three years had severely impacted on their pockets.

"There is so much imported sugar that we are running at a loss. At least 5 000 tons of sugar is being dumped and we simply

cannot sustain ourselves in the market. Added to this, we are recovering from the recent drought, and these cheap imports have made life difficult.

"I've been farming for the past 40 years and we are now simply not making enough money to sustain our farming activities."

He said his farm was running at a loss and he often went into overdraft trying to maintain it. He said a lot of his money also went into farm security as life on the farm was not safe after recent

land grabs in the area.

"We are simply not safe anymore."

He said his son, who he was hoping would take over the family business, worked in Joburg.

"He doesn't see a future in farming and I don't blame him. I can't see us owning our farms for a long time."

He said while expenses had not reached a stage where they were left without food, anything but the basic necessities was a luxury.

"Fortunately we grow our own vegetables, so we are able to sustain ourselves but the option of luxuries is non-existent."

He said it was worse for farmers who used their pension funds to maintain the land.

Explaining a typical day on the farm, Harikrishna said he rose at 5am, even in winter, and started work an hour later.

"I pick up the workers and take them to the farm. We are in the process of harvesting sugar cane, so the crop needs to be

cleaned and weeded and herbicide applied. We also have to spray ripening agents and undertake farm maintenance to ensure everything is in working order."

He said that during winter, farming was a bit quieter than normal.

"We get our land ready for spring. It's when the sugar cane is planted."

Harikrishna said the only solution to ensure his and other farmers' livelihoods were bettered, was to halt cheap imports.



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Uphill battle for farmers

NORTH Coast sugar cane farmer Gansen Moodley says the suggestion that farmers should diversify crops is easier said than done.

Moodley, 52, a medium-scale farmer who owns 280ha of land in Kearsney and Waterbosch, said agriculturists had advised them to venture into other fields, but this was not practical advice.

"They want us to opt for tree crops, such as avocado or nuts, where there is a niche, but it costs at least R250 000 to even start production.

"We simply cannot afford that. It's not feasible."

The other option, he said, was to grow vegetables.

"But that market is unfortunately flooded with vegetable farmers.

"Last year, 600 000 tons of sugar

was imported. The government needs to stop importation and support us. If this continues, we will be out of jobs and our livelihoods will be lost."

He said at least R6 billion had been injected into the government through the recent hike in sugar tax. "Surely something can be done to help us survive."

Moodley lives with his wife and three children on the North Coast, but doesn't live on his farm.

He sees no future for agriculture and farming for his children and has encouraged them to take different paths. In his case, "farming is all I know. I've been farming all my life. I have to work the land as hard as I can to get something out of it.

"Maybe when I pass on, the land shall be sold."