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Building from grassroots best for KZN's rural farmers

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THE KwaZulu-Natal Rural Farmers' Association (KZN-RFA) said yesterday that a bottom-up approach was necessary to deal with the problems farmers faced, and maximise the sector's production rates in the province.

Mfundo Thango, the chairperson of the Agriculture Sector Education and Training Authority (AgriSETA), said training was of foremost importance to agriculture entrepreneurs at ground level.

"We provide training to rural-based farmers, but still have funding challenges, as we still depend on AgriSETA's funding," said Thango.

The association harbours ambitions to become a fully-fledged agricultural institution in the future, providing agriculture-focused education. But it was limited by the lack of sufficient funding.

Thango said the most ideal situation was if resources and programmes were directed

to emerging farmers at the ground level, who had a proven track record, but only needed resources.

Statistics South Africa's first quarter results showed that the country's gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by more than 2%, with the agriculture, forestry and fishing industry contracting over 24% and contributed -0.7 of a percentage point to GDP growth.

Recovery

The decrease was mainly attributed to the drop in the production of field crops and horticultural products.

The sector had shown strong recovery last season, when it increased production by more than 33%.

LIMA Rural Development Foundation programmes manager Kathy Pitout said they had worked with emerging farmers. "We provide technical support, access to input supplies and marketing. We also provide them with a fair amount of training to be farmers."

She said the market linkages became more critical as one increased smallholder production, necessitating a top-down approach to establish agreements.

"Right from the start you need the retailers, who have skills to link small-scale producers with marketing opportunities," said Pitout.

The dean of the agricultural department at the University of Zululand, Prof GE Zharare, said that the bottom-up approach might not work in some cases, owing to the technology required.

"Most of the farmers do not know the potential of their land and their environment, and sometimes they grow the wrong crop," said Zharare.

"We need to sit down with the farmers (small-scale) and discuss their problems, their needs and get their input about what their area would support.

"That would be a better solution than having them directing what should be done," he said.