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# Rural poverty hits women, kids

Agricultural landscape still untransformed 20 years into democracy as the government revisits its assistance

NOKUTHULA NTULI

MORE than two decades into democracy, black women and children remain the face of rural poverty because the agricultural landscape in KwaZulu-Natal has remained largely untransformed.

The majority of families in the mostly rural Zululand district rely on government grants to mitigate the impact of the scourge of unemployment.

"We get seasonal jobs at the citrus farms in Nkwalini but those are not always available," Hengiwe Zulu, from Umlalazi outside Eshowe, said.

"But we have the knowledge and can plant our own oranges if the government can help us with the land and an irrigation scheme but we don't know which door to knock on."

The mother of three lost her husband, Bafana, who was a taxi driver, more than eight years ago and now has to raise her children herself.

"We grew up planting most of our own food and we would sell whatever is left over but farming is now expensive, it's not just about getting seeds on the ground, we need water and pesticides," Zulu's neighbour Bonakele Mbatha said.

"And if you had to choose between buying a loaf of bread so that your children have something to eat today and buying seed which may never sprout, what would you choose?"

KwaZulu-Natal's newly appointed agriculture MEC Themba Mthembu said it was indeed a concern that white commercial farming dominates the agricultural economy and poverty persists among black rural communities.

According to the KZN poverty eradication master plan, 28% of the province's 11 million citizens live in extreme poverty and a further 29% live in absolute poverty.

At least 32.9% are food deprived and KZN has the highest gender-based poverty incidence as well as the second highest level of rural poverty in the country.

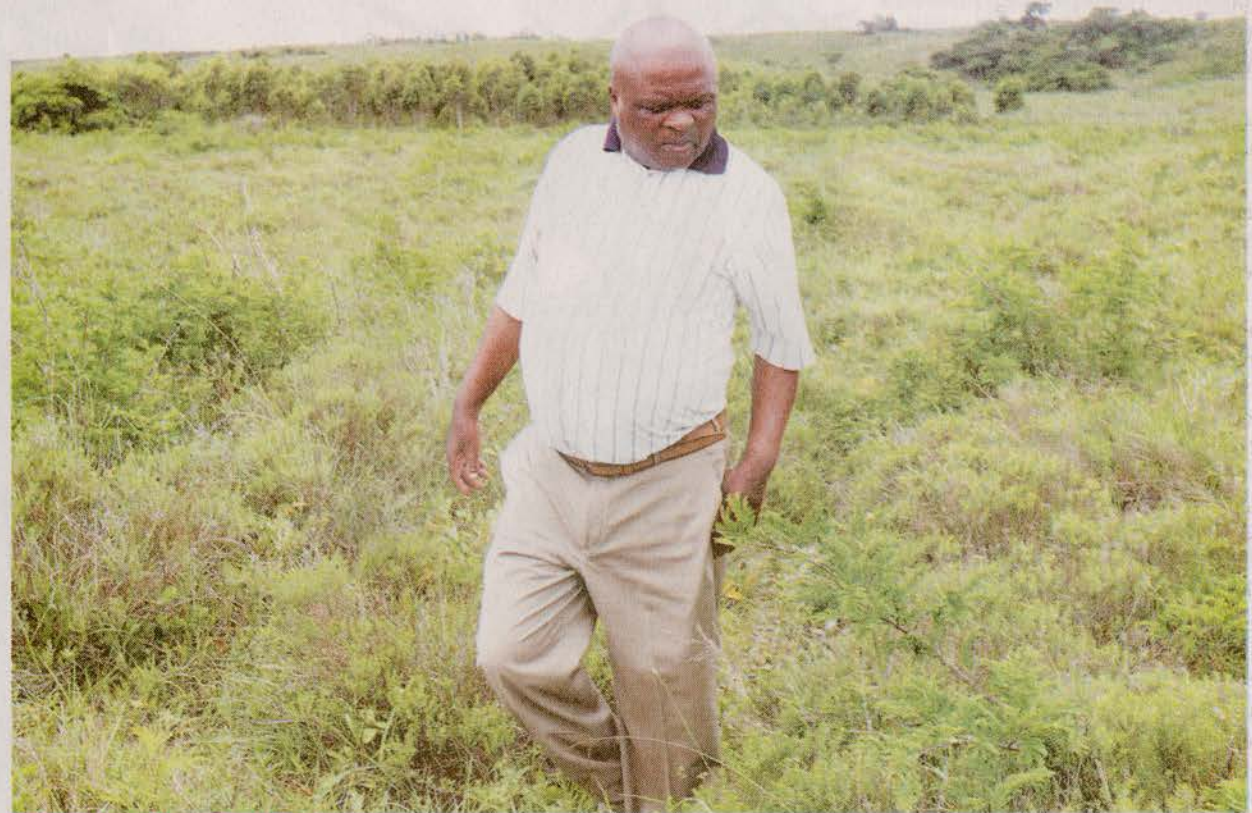
"Umkhanyakude, Umzinyathi, Zululand and Sisonke have the highest poverty levels in the country. Rural poverty is a challenge we have to address. Our strategy going forward has to effectively address growth and development in rural municipalities to create opportunities for unemployed youths so as to stem the tide of people moving to urban areas," Mthembu said.

He believes that the most effective way for the department to promote agricultural activities for both subsistence and smallholder farmers is to engage communities and traditional leaders on the various government programmes. He said many people did not know about these programmes.

"Food security has to be the overarching focus of the department. Consequently, the revival of the directorate responsible for food security will have to be done immediately. This directorate must be adequately funded to be equal to the task of driving this programme. The defunct mushroom programme directed at the poorest households will have to be revisited," Mthembu said, adding that their plans included ensuring that every home had a garden.

This would also include the revival of seed and mechanisation programmes for subsistence farmers, a system where people are taught to conserve seeds after harvesting to ensure that there is future self-sufficiency with less or no reliance on the government, the MEC said.

According to media reports, the majority of commercial agricultural land is in the hands of white commercial farmers so even those who want to



**OFFERING FOOD SECURITY:** MEC for agriculture and rural development Themba Mthembu visits some of KZN's poorer rural districts. PICTURE: MBUYISELO NDOLOVU

get into the sector need to have loaded pockets to obtain the land.

To address the issue of white dominance in the sector, Mthembu said the department was looking into establishing a "new generation of agriculturists and commercial farmers" with a specific focus on youth and women in terms of directing funding and giving technical

support with hopes to turn them into viable commercial farmers.

He said that there was also a need to revisit the 50:50 policy for funding of aspirant farmers who needed assistance on farm acquisition.

"The policy, in its present form, is a hindrance to fast-tracking the entrance of the previously disadvantaged into

full commercial farming. This is in light of the fact that the state assistance remains fixed at 50%, no matter the value of the asking price. It's also against this background that black people have in the main, had no security. Banks tend to decline them as they pose a risk for business loans," Mthembu said.

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