

'KZN needs to pair up collapsed farms with agricultural graduates'

Pairing unproductive land reform farms with unemployed black agricultural graduates could ensure improved food production and employment opportunities. This is according to KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (KZN DARD) MEC, Cyril Xaba, who was speaking at the Youth in Agriculture Summit held recently in Durban.

The summit, the first of its kind in the province, was attended by more than 700 unemployed agricultural graduates.

"Many land reform farms have collapsed and beautiful productive land lies fallow. We have well-meaning trusts that own land but do not have the skills to farm. Let us start building a bridge to span the divide between unemployed graduates and their skills, talent and love for agriculture with the land that is lying fallow and unproductive," Xaba said.

All role players – graduates, government and the private sector – would have to play their parts.

"This bridge is not about handouts to graduates. It's not about the state bankrolling farms or doing the farming for you. It's about creating an enabling environment and supplying the support so that you can

become farmers, or take up positions in the agricultural value chain," he said.

Under the KZN DARD Strategy for Agrarian Transformation, a number of projects that could create opportunities for the youth had been implemented. These included the 2016 project to commercialise communal livestock production; the building of infrastructure such as silos, mills and abattoirs to help farmers gain better control of their products; the formation of partnerships with commodity organisations to improve production and marketing; and the creation of agri-parks to develop agro-processing and the secondary agricultural sector.

"The space is opening up and there are opportunities developing for youth to channel their skills, energy, passion and creativity in the agricultural sector. Young people have enormous potential for innovation and risk-taking. We want this potential to be unleashed in the pursuit of growth and development of our rural areas," Xaba said.

Deputy Minister of the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, Mcebisi Skwatsha, said that it was a "serious indictment"

to have young black agricultural graduates unemployed in their hundreds.

"We need to link farmers, research and competent extension services if agriculture is to contribute to job creation and food security," he said.

The department had a number of programmes in place that targeted younger people, providing work experience and building a pool of skilled young black farmers. This included a 12-month internship for unemployed agricultural graduates through the Agricultural Graduates Programme.

'YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE ENORMOUS POTENTIAL FOR INNOVATION AND RISK-TAKING'

"In KZN alone, 40 unemployed graduates have already been enlisted in the programme. A further 50 will be recruited in the next financial year. The 12-month internship gives graduates skills to enhance their employability," Skwatsha said.

Under the department's National Rural Youth Service Corps (NARYSEC) programme, rural youth are contracted for two years to learn the skills needed to provide services for socioeconomic development in their own communities.

– Robyn Joubert

Farmers urged to place black graduates on farms

There are 40 000 farmers subscribed to Kwanalu, KwaZulu-Natal's agricultural union. "If one in 20 of these farmers could be persuaded to take on a young black graduate as an intern, all 700 of you graduates sitting here would have jobs," said Future Farmer founder, Judy Stuart, speaking at the Youth in Agriculture Summit held recently in Durban.

Stuart, a dairy farmer, said her non-profit organisation had grown from four or five applicants in 2006 to more than 600 applicants presently.

"Unfortunately we don't have the resources to help everyone. We've started to get a bit of funding, including from AgriSETA, which will make a meaningful difference. It's important that young people placed on farms and/or receiving training are paid for their work so that they are not draining communities or being a burden on their families," she said.

The AgriSETA funding will pay for the stipends of 100 college and university graduates in the first year, and a second group of 100 students in the second year. "We've placed about 30 graduates on farms in the last month, but we want funding to keep them on those farms for a second year. Two years of practical experience on a farm is a good period," Stuart said.

"Farmers are reluctant to take on people when they're dealing with drought, a weak rand and high input costs, but we'll be paying the stipends of the graduates so farmers should jump at the chance. We have the most incredible young people. They can step up to the plate, take responsibility and are prepared to start working at the bottom. We've already produced some top farmers and intend to produce many more. There's massive potential and we need to exploit this and create opportunities."

According to labour consultant, Walter Blore, the challenge was to create jobs on the scale needed to meet demand.

"There are so many graduates and so few farms, but things are starting to happen. I know of two farmers who have gone to the expense of building training centres on their farms. White commercial farmers are starting to see the incredible potential of young black farmers and we're going to see more opportunities coming through," he said. – Robyn Joubert