



agriculture & rural development

Department:
agriculture
& rural development
PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL

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SPEECH BY KZN MEC FOR AGRICULTURE & RURAL DEVELOPMENT, CYRIL XABA ON HIS VISIT TO WESTON AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE IN MOOI RIVER ON THURSDAY, 12 FEBRUARY 2015

Members of the School Governing Body, Principal, Management and staff

Members of the KwaZulu-Natal Legislature: Hon Francois Rodgers and
Hon Inkosi Zibuse Mlaba

Distinguished guests and alumni of the school

Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for having me as a guest at your school and congratulations on the celebration of your centenary last year. I have it on good authority that agricultural schools such as yours can go on existing for another hundred years and more.

I was at a meeting recently with agricultural commodity organisations where I outlined my new Strategy for Agrarian Transformation. At this meeting, a member of the audience commented on a report he read where top investors had been telling graduates to forget careers in law or even investment banking, they advised that the future was in working within the farming sector.

The National Development Plan has also recognised that agriculture is a key sector to create jobs and grow the country's economy. There was heartening news in his regard when Statistics South Africa released their latest unemployment figures. According to yesterday's Business Report, South Africa's unemployment rate declined to a one-year low of 24.3 percent in the fourth quarter but the good news was that agriculture and construction industries added jobs. The agriculture industry increased employment by

56,000 and construction added 53,000 workers. So, Weston can be assured that your teaching is essential. You are training young people who can go on and make a difference in growing the agriculture sector.

Since my appointment as MEC for Agriculture and Rural Development, I have emphasised two messages that agriculture is science and that agriculture is business.

The foundation of my new strategy and the basis on which all else rests is scientific research, technology development and Extension. The next layers are to use a commodity approach, firm business models and to incorporate agro-processing as part of farming operations. This base will hold up and support four pillars. These are the re-capitalisation and post settlement support of land reform farms, the establishment of agri villages, river valley farming enterprises and communal agricultural estates. For the strategy to work, we are going to need more agricultural scientists, agricultural engineers, well trained farmers and sufficient numbers of extension officers to go out and skill smaller farmers in the latest farming methods.

All of this, will be key to transforming the agricultural sector into growing the province's economy; creating jobs; enhancing rural development and ensuring food security.

My confidence in this strategy was given a boost after reading a report based on the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation's latest newsletter. According to the report, Africa will feed itself within the next 15 years. The author of the report, Professor Sayed Azam-Ali, from the University of Nottingham said that the good news for African agriculture is that, "agronomy and its natural twin, agricultural extension, are back on the agenda. The Professor said that if Africa is to feed itself, the women and the men who grow its crops need access to technical expertise on how to manage their variable natural resources and limited inputs and market intelligence on what to grow, what to sell and what to keep.

He goes on to say that there will be no quick fix that will transform African agriculture without skilful agronomy and intelligent extension. "Whatever the promises brought by new drought-resistant varieties of crops such as maize, they cannot achieve their potential without the wise management of fertilisers, timing of cultivation and appropriate crop rotations."

This is precisely what agricultural colleges like Weston teaches – the science and business of farming. Going into the future, the challenge for all of us is to attract more young people to pursue careers in the agricultural sector.

I am impressed by what I have seen of the school and by what you teach. You

and other agricultural schools I have visited have given me much food for thought. To this end, I wish to announce that I intend to introduce a revitalisation grant as my token of appreciation and expression of support to the four agricultural schools in the province. The agricultural schools revitalisation grant will, among other things, aim to assist in the provision of equipment and other infrastructure necessary to improve the quality of agricultural education and practical training. This grant will have two components to it, the details of which will be announced in my next budget speech. Agricultural education is the *sine qua non* of agricultural development, and therefore its importance in the sustainability of the agricultural sector cannot be under estimated. This resonates well with my vision to build an inclusive, sustainable and vibrant agricultural sector.

Your motto - “Academic excellence with practical knowledge,” strikes a chord. This is what we must all strive for and this is what is going to help us grow agriculture in our Province. I thank you