

Farming initiative empowers emerging tobacco farmers, accelerates agricultural transformation

A group small-scale farmers in Mpumalanga and Limpopo participated in an agricultural upskill initiative which introduced them to tobacco farming and has seen significant changes in their lives. A research study conducted by academics from the University of the North West who looked into how participation in an incubation project over a period of three years had led to a marked improvement in the lives of the farmers and their families, contains evidence of their success.



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Introducing emerging farmers to tobacco and other crops

The farmers were part of an experimental project run by British American Tobacco South Africa which partnered with Mobile Agri Skills Development and Training (MASDT) - one-stop centre for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the agricultural sector, whose task is to provide support to emerging farmers in rural areas. Along with partner, Limpopo Tobacco Processors, they pioneered the Emerging Farmers Initiative aimed at transforming the agricultural sector by introducing emerging farmers to tobacco and other crops.

In total, 74 incubation projects were established in Bufflespruit, Badplaas and Steynsdorp in Mpumalanga; Nzhelele and Mianzwi in the Vembe area of Limpopo, as well as Groblersdal. Farmers that participated in the incubation received practical skills training in cultivating larger tracts of farmland and a deeper understanding of various crops. They also received resources such as fertilisers, pesticides, seeds, farming equipment and financial support.

Other benefits of the incubation included assistance with plant production, tobacco production, poultry and care of livestock. Alternate non-tobacco crops including maize, butternut, cabbage, peppers, beetroot, onions and spinach were added to a rotational cropping plan to help the farmers augment their income.

Around R50m has been invested in the project which since 2011 has facilitated the planting of over 500 hectares of tobacco leaves and 300 hectares of vegetable crops. BAT buys all the tobacco leaf produced by participating farmers. The projects have created over 2,500 jobs whose beneficiaries support in excess of 3,900 dependents.

Incubation sees positive impacts on social, communal and economic development

Professors Hendri Coetzee and Werner Nell, independent researchers from the University of the North West, visited 22 of the projects to conduct an in-depth study on the impact of the initiative on emerging farmers. In their findings, the academics discovered that farmers that participated in the incubation had recorded drastically increased crop yields due to the skills acquired in the project. They were able to manage larger tracts of farmland, apply proper irrigation practices, control pests and diseases.

Their understanding and management of their personal finances had improved vastly. They were now able to save and actively invest their own money, something they were unable to do before. They were able to use money earned from their agribusiness to buy new homes or renovate their existing ones, to purchase new vehicles, and generally improve their farms by installing additional irrigation systems to secure water supply.

“Farmers in Badplaas region plagued by crop theft were able to hire private security to guard their crops, control access (to their farms) and protect agricultural assets. They could also hire additional staff to assist on farms,” the research found.

Profits earned from the projects also allowed the farmers to send their children to school and higher education institution, provide for their families and afford better healthcare. They were also able to employ additional labour from within their communities to assist them on the farms.

Female farmers that were part of the incubation recorded less reliance on their husbands or on government social grants for support. “The outcomes of the MASDT project were found to have a number of cumulative and/or secondary outcomes that resulted in positive impacts on a broader social and communal level, such as supporting local economic development and empowering women,” the research concluded.

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