

Not chicken to try: black farmers need support

By [Sibongile Mahlinza](#)

27 Aug 2012

Black farmers are under the spotlight. The failure of land reform in SA has given rise to questions about whether black farmers are capable of filling the role of agricultural producers, even whether they are at all keen to take up the challenge.

Such questions are rooted in a statement to parliament by land affairs minister Gugile Nkwinti almost three years ago. Nkwinti reported then that 90% of land reform projects had failed to result in productive farms. He issued his now infamous "use it or lose it" ultimatum to beneficiaries, threatening that state acquired land would be taken back unless they used it productively.

Many commentators have dismissed Nkwinti's shock warning as shortsighted, given the absence of adequate access to markets, finance, support and expertise for new farmers. But while the threat has dissipated like hot air, the implied judgment has hung like a cloud over the heads of black farmers.

Afgri chairman Jethro Mbau has said: "When I encourage black people to enter farming, I tell them they will have to invest a lot and then wait a long time for returns. They look at me as if I'm crazy. Perhaps I am. But when you own land you are obliged to use it productively. You have to farm it." He recounts the opinion of a white farmer that anyone would fail who was given a R10m gift - no repayment needed - and told to farm.

"It's expensive to get started. Machinery, implements, land, seeds - these things are costly."

It is easier for the children of farming families to become farmers, he believes. "Farmers' children inherit the land and they're attuned to it. They're not attracted to bright lights and big cars."

There are some who question these thoughts. Of course there are successful black farmers. A project near the scenic town of Estcourt in KwaZulu Natal proves that, though it requires hard work, farming is not rocket science.

Husband-and-wife team Sihle Manciya and Phangisile Mtshali Manciya, with partner Sibongile Mahlinza, bought 70ha about eight years ago and have transformed it into an integrated farming venture known as Kwahlangabenza.

Here they raise poultry, cattle, sheep, goats and pigs, grow crops and have expanded into agri-tourism through a lodge with half a dozen attractive chalets and a kitchen and dining hall.

Sihle Manciya explains the model, a simple one: "Our main source of income is the chickens. From January to July it provides 60% of our income and from July to December that is 90%. From that income we built the lodge."

They invest in day-old chicks and sell them live at six weeks - "five weeks if they grow well", he says. "We sell about 2000 chickens a week, to customers in the Eastern Cape, Umtata, Mount Frere and Mount Ayliff. I can sell more but I need money for more chicks. The demand goes up a lot in December."

Manciya says people planning an abattoir for the town of Weenen, 50km away, have called him to ask for his business. "I am keen to get involved. We could save money and work to a better timetable."

The main challenges of the chicken business are high feed costs, brought about by record grain prices, and electricity costs. "Chickens must be kept in a constant temperature-controlled environment with heaters and lights," says Manciya.

Mahlinza interrupts to say that stiff competition in the chicken sector is yet another challenge, but Manciya insists: "I am not scared of competition. My chickens are top quality and well fed. If I send 100 to a customer, not one of them will die on the way."

There are about 6000-11000 chickens in the poultry houses at any time. Most of the chicken feed comes from the maize and soya grown on the farm itself, though some of the ideal mix has to be bought.

The livestock, says Manciya, are an "insurance policy" - cash on the hoof.

"We have 50-odd cattle and almost 80 goats, as well as a few sheep and pigs. We sell some live when money is tight and we have to pay bills. Goats are sought after for traditional ceremonies."

The lodge is still a work in progress, he says: "It is a place where people can experience a bit of Zulu tradition. It shows that we are the Zulu people."

Ncedi Xaba, the lodge manager, says it has attracted international visitors "but mainly local people" for conferences.

Manciya says: "The model works for us." Though the venture employs just eight people at present, he says: "The whole purpose for me is to create jobs. If I die, this place must live on."

For Mtshali Manciya, who still has a "day job" as a director of an international funding organisation, the farm is the culmination of a childhood dream.

"I grew up on farms and I decided when I was seven that I wanted to farm. I can't understand why people would say blacks can't farm, or don't want to - we grew up in rural areas and we are close to the land."

She agrees that the investment required in farming "makes it difficult for black farmers".

"It is an expensive venture, and capital intensive. Inputs cost a lot and you need working capital, skills and tools. If you don't have that, whether you are black, brown or blue, you have a problem."

Even though her farm is "now on the path to success", she admits to making "many mistakes".

"We lost R120000 because we didn't properly understand the need for ventilation for chickens, and how important it is to avoid overcrowding them.

"Another time I planted 10000 cabbages with seedlings given to me by the provincial agriculture department. But when they were harvested I had no way of getting them to market, and the department which gave me the seedlings couldn't help me market them. Eventually I just put the word out that people could come to my farm to fetch free cabbages."

She agrees with Stellenbosch University agriculture dean Mohammad Karaan, who has bemoaned as "apartheid's biggest crime" the detachment of African people from the land.

Says Karaan: "Now Africans can't farm profitably but it shouldn't be a surprise - they have lost 100 years of agricultural tradition and expertise."

Mtshali Manciya believes the venture has "done best" when it has had help and advice from agriculture department extension officers and neighbours. "White neighbouring farmers are mostly sympathetic and ready to help, because they understand what farming takes, much more than people who sit in government and say things that don't make sense."

She believes land reform is suffering because of a lack of "programme and project management".

"How can you spend many millions of taxpayers' money on farms, give them to people and then show up three years later and be surprised that it has deteriorated? You should be checking up constantly - and warning the people that you are going to do it - and assessing their needs, and helping them. Then, before you tell them that they have failed, decide whether it is not you who have failed."

She goes on: "Farming is a business that takes a lot of heart. But heart is not enough. You need a lot more. There must be assistance from government."

Mahlinza, a knowledgeable, experienced farmer, entered the partnership with the couple after being introduced by an official in the agriculture department.

"They let me farm their land," he says.

He believes it is mainly "mind-set" that prevents the emergence of more successful black farmers.

"People must see the light of farming. They have become used to being workers, not farm owners. Owners have to get up early and work long, hard hours. But when you're doing your own thing you're making your own money. You must have a vision, a goal you want to reach.

"Farming brings many challenges, but if you can face that then you can be a farmer."

The main problem with official efforts to help farmers, he says, is that "too often people want to think for farmers instead of asking them what they need and acting on what they say".

Besides his share in the Kwahlangabenza partnership, he also grows maize on communal land in the area, under contract from SA Breweries, but bemoans the lack of infrastructure such as silos to store it in.

Silos, of course, are expensive, but Mahlinza sees it differently: "Silos are actually cheap. When each farmer in the area loses 100t of maize because he can't store it, that's expensive."

Source: Financial Mail