

Eliminating poverty through agriculture

More than 350 producers, technical advisers, researchers and various stakeholders in the deciduous fruit industry gathered for the annual HORTGRO Science Technical Symposium at the Allée Bleue Conference Centre near Franschhoek, which also included field days in Grabouw and Simondium.



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Prof Jonathan Jansen, vice chancellor of the University of the Free State, said a lack of moral and ethical leadership stands at the core of what is wrong in the dysfunctional South African society - from the political and the corporate sphere to family life and the religious sector. Mediocrity is becoming institutionalised in schools, stealing is becoming normative and our society is still deeply divided.

Prof Jansen quoted the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi who said that people's true character is measured by how they treat those who work for them. "Merely tolerating people did not work in Ireland, Rwanda or Sudan; to heal our society and to earn respect we need to embrace people. We have to become involved in other's lives," he said.

"An exemplary leader is the most powerful case for change," he added before challenging the attendees to ensure that the businesses or companies instil a true sense of transformation, and that their children can learn from their examples about what is right and wrong.

NDP the best

The issue of leadership was also addressed by speakers such as Prof Marius Ungerer of the Stellenbosch University Business School, Frans van Wyk of Agrifusion and Ismail Motala, interim chair of the Western Cape branch of the African Farmers' Association of South Africa (AFASA-WC) and board member of the Deciduous Fruit Development Chamber of South Africa (DFDC-SA).

Prof Ungerer stressed that the agricultural sector needs to make the National Development Plan (NDP) aspirations of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality by 2030 a reality. "It's about building capacity, and improving the lives of people especially the youth. The NDP is the best, all inclusive and comprehensive macro plan for the integrated long-term national development that a developing country can have."

"We need to overcome our cynicism and make conscious choices to be leaders in everyday situations, and to change the life possibilities of many," he challenged. "Yes, the plan is big, but by starting small and acting now you can make a difference."

Ungerer emphasised that skills development and the offering of apprenticeships are crucial for sustainable growth. "I challenge you to align your companies and business plans with the NDP and the Millennium Development Goals."

Leaders to be blamed

Motala called on leaders to account for the major crisis in the agricultural sector. He described the fact that so few hectares of stone and pome fruit orchards are fully owned by black farmers, as "disastrous".

"The current equity schemes that rely on state grant funding to develop black ownership in agriculture need a rethink. We are easy to rubbish the policies government comes up with, but no one in industry has yet come up with alternative developmental models," said Motala. The agricultural sector has not yet adequately acknowledged how government has provided a stable environment in which the industry could grow and prosper over the past few years.

Social unrest is the biggest concern business leaders have worldwide, not just in South Africa, said Frans van Wyk of Agrifusion. "If discussions on labour issues do not move forward, we will stay in 2012," he said referring to the labour unrest in the deciduous fruit industry two years ago.

"Marikana and De Doorns have changed the landscape - things have not been the same since. Do not make the mistake of thinking that it will not happen again." He advised agribusinesses to take control of their supply chain, to ensure that they know the preferences of their clients, to invest in technical innovations such as solar and wind energy, and to stop ignoring the plight of people. He emphasized the importance of training especially women who live on the farms. "We need to rethink how we engage with unions, labour policies, housing standards, housing for pensioners and retirement funds for workers.

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