

Harnessing the power of agritech to help SA's smallholder farmers

As part of its multi-million Rand investment in agriculture, Microsoft South Africa has selected The Awareness Company as the beneficiary of its AgriTech Programme. The Awareness Company will develop and roll out three high-impact solutions in the agriculture sector within the next year - positively impacting one of the country's critical sectors, helping to drive growth and job creation.



Source: Supplied

The AgriTech Programme's main objective is to drive digital transformation in the agriculture sector by collaborating with a technology company that will develop high impact solutions and empower smallholder farmers.

South African smallholder farmers face various challenges that prevent them from achieving their full potential. Challenges are security concerns, a lack of infrastructure, access to competitive formal markets, production and business skills, funding and financial support to re-invest in farming activities, as well as compliance with food safety regulations and legislation.

"Technology – specifically agritech – has the ability to empower our country's smallholder farmers by enabling them to become more productive, efficient, competitive, commercially viable and sustainable," says Lillian Barnard, CEO of Microsoft South Africa.

However, many South African smallholder farmers are failing to leverage available technologies that will allow them to scale into commercial farms. Limited digitisation leads to low productivity, inefficiency and low levels of competitiveness due to a lack of actionable insights.

This is where the AgriTech Programme and The Awareness Company come in.

The solutions that will be developed will enable smallholder farmers to improve efficiencies in their farming operations through the use of operational insights. This will allow them to reduce the cost of production, increase yields, strengthen linkages through the value chain and improve farm security.

"The country's two to four million smallholder farmers play a critical role in driving food security and economic participation, but they face specific and deep-rooted challenges, and the sector is typically underserved in terms of high-tech solutions," says Priaash Ramadeen, co-founder and CEO of The Awareness Company.

Solving real-world challenges

"That's why Microsoft's support and investment in helping us as a local, homegrown business to grow and develop solutions that focus on solving real-world problems is so meaningful. The programme is a jump-start that has enabled us to create and update products that synchronise with the work we have already done in the agricultural space to promote sustainable agriculture and food security through intelligent data."

The Awareness Company was founded in 2018 with the objective of using intelligent data and insights to tackle real challenges. Microsoft's investment is assisting The Awareness Company with configuring, developing, educating, marketing and contextualising three high-impact agritech products.

"All of these solutions are driven by data, and the insights and intelligence tell a story about the farm and create stronger farmers by helping them become commercially viable – as well as giving them peace of mind," says Ramadeen.

These solutions are:

- Farm security: Combining Artificial Intelligence (AI), data analytics and sensors through an easily accessible integrated mobile platform that allows tracking of livestock, detection of perimeters, movements and workforce monitoring, as well as providing alerts about suspicious activities. It reduces risk, acts as an early warning system and provides a safe living and operating environment – ultimately increasing productivity and reducing production costs through real-time insights.
- Farm awareness: Allowing farmers to digitise their farms to improve overall capability management of livestock, crops, people and assets. It enables tracking of livestock health and weight, logging of genealogy information, real-time task logging for personnel, analysis of rainfall and planting/harvesting, scheduling of jobs, and quality checks and pest scouting. This improves yields and quality, competitiveness and compliance with regulations, as well as reduces production costs.
- Agri insights: providing data-driven insights and innovation using AI, the Internet of Things (IoT) and analytics to improve the services of agri organisations. This is done by using insights from new and existing data which provide real-time understanding of everything happening on the farm – helping reduce risk, get more value from data and products, and provide value-added services based on these insights. This improves the value chain, and access to local and international markets.

"Our partnership with Microsoft is opening up opportunities to do work that no one else is doing – and which would not be possible without the support of a company like Microsoft, who is able to help businesses grow and elevate our offerings to make a real difference," says Ramadeen.

"We want to help unlock the potential of one of South Africa's core industries and its smallholder farmers by tapping into the capabilities of agritech. By investing in local businesses and technologies that are truly disruptive, we will be able to

build on our commitment to support the competitiveness of key sectors through innovation and drive economic growth in South Africa," concludes Barnard.

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