

Which horse must I back?

Mr Aggrey Mahanjana, Group Managing Director of NERPO Group, studied the manifestos of the various political parties and came to the conclusion that most of them do not comprehensively deal with agriculture. The following are his thoughts.

'South Africa will be holding National and Provincial elections on April 22nd 2009. It is essential for those who will be voting to understand the different policy proposals advanced by different political parties in their manifestos.

Though NERPO, as an organisation has no connection with any political party, its members belong to various political parties of their choice and the main task of NERPO as a farmer organisation is to influence political parties and legislature to support the needs and desires of its members.

Knowing the political understanding of our members, this article is produced to guide them and the farming community at large to take an informed decision at the election polls as to which horse to back. This article focuses particularly on policy suggestions for agriculture and rural development.

Policy proposals

The policy proposals that are contained in political party manifestos seem to suggest an inadequate understanding of challenges that face the agricultural sector. While there are attempts to address some of the important issues, it is clear that the policy proposals are incomplete.

The African National Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC) propose to redistribute land and to actually speed up the process of land reform. This is a very fundamental proposal which is not clearly stated by other political parties. It recognises the limitations of the market approach to land reform. In addition to the above the PAC proposes training and mentorship for the land reform beneficiaries while the ANC suggests support for food production initiatives in communities.

The Democratic Alliance (DA) and Independent Democrats (ID) emphasise a market system approach to land reform, which is well known for its failures.

The parties seek to further promote protection of property rights and adherence to the rule of law which is entrenched in the country's constitution. All the above policy approaches, depending on how they are implemented, tend to undermine or reduce opportunities for redistributing land to the poor.

They actually protect a few large scale commercial farmers who own more than 80% of agricultural land. The Congress of the People (COPE), United Democratic Movement (UDM) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) do not say much about redistributing land in their manifestos.

Deliberate position

This may be interpreted as a deliberate policy position because of lack of consensus on the matter or just that the party leadership do not have a concrete policy position regarding land and land reform. COPE only suggests fast tracking of land claims and restitution while the IFP will concentrate on ensuring that prime agricultural land does not go to subsistence agriculture.

The UDM is more concerned about the environmental issues and suggests that they are a national priority. It however, does not say the same about agriculture or land reform. Agriculture policy proposals are not clearly articulated. Land reform and redistribution is an important programme that is central to promoting equity through empowering the historically disadvantaged individuals and also for food security among other things. As such it is important for political parties to have a clear vision for land reform.

Increasing budget

The PAC was the only political party which made proposals on increasing national budgeted expenditure specifically for agriculture while the DA suggested more finance for land reform. The ID was the only political party that advocated for the provision of inputs for small scale

farmers. This is surprising considering that farmers and farmer organisations have raised a lot of concern about high input costs and how these impact on agricultural production leading to food price increases.

Food security

On the food security and poverty reduction front, it is encouraging to note that half of the political parties emphasised the need for the rural poor to produce their own food on small plots/gardens. This is a better approach that can lead to sustainable food security for the poor. It is more progressive than the social grant system that has got a tendency to promote dependency on the state by those who benefit from the scheme. The social grants systems should be properly managed to ensure that appropriate beneficiaries are supported by this scheme.

Challenges

While the ANC and PAC appear to have articulated better policy positions with regards to agriculture, they still need to show that they have a fuller appreciation of challenges by providing complete and improved policy options. There is need to elaborate on the actual policy programmes and implementation of practical strategies. Over the years implementation has been one of the biggest challenges facing government. As such most farmers will expect to see some proposed solutions to this problem.

In a country where national expenditure on agriculture is less than 1%, political parties are expected to show that they are aware of the agriculture finance problem and make specific policy proposals that will seek to improve the situation.

We understand and acknowledge the concerns about corruption and mismanagement of funds that are allocated for agriculture. These stated challenges are however not supposed to distract the attention of agricultural stakeholders from a clear fact that agriculture is not adequately financed.

If we compare what developed nations (such as the United States) are doing in terms of supporting agriculture, we realise that our country is doing relatively less. The history of agriculture in the now developed countries such as China shows that as much as 12 to 25% of the national expenditure had to be spend on agriculture to promote development in the 1970s. It is in this context that NEPAD through the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) is proposing that African governments commit a minimum of 10% for agriculture in their budgetary allocations.

The policy proposals that were made by the political parties would have made more sense if they seriously considered current prevailing agricultural challenges and the government programmes that are in place. The other important considerations to be made include taking into account the concerns that were raised by the different stakeholders in agriculture which include farmers, farmer organisations, input producing companies and consumers, among others.

Party leadership

It is our view that farmers should support political parties in the 2009 elections based on the following:

- Leadership - The presidential candidate and senior leadership of a political party should have good leadership qualities and should be trustworthy.
- Values - They have to be guided by clear values, which are shared by citizens of this country. They should demonstrate commitment to the same values. This is in addition to understanding the challenges that face the nation.
- Track record - They must be honest and principled individuals who have appropriate skills and experience that are required to lead a country such as South Africa.
- Service delivery - The political parties which demonstrate that they can deliver on their promises must have the capacity to carry out government work, taking into account the interests of the nation."