

Employment Equity in Agriculture: Striking a Balance Between Transformation and Reality

Employment Equity (EE) is an essential part of South Africa's push to build a fairer and more inclusive workforce by addressing past inequalities. But while transformation is necessary, the new EE targets will place serious pressure on the agricultural sector, with little consideration for what's happening on the ground. Rural employment challenges, critical skills shortages, and the unique structure of the industry will make compliance extremely difficult—if not outright impossible in some cases. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work for agriculture, where hiring constraints are a daily reality. Instead of driving meaningful change, these rigid targets risk becoming another bureaucratic headache that causes more harm than good.

At a recent engagement with the Department of Employment and Labour (DoEL) on 13 February 2025, agricultural stakeholders voiced their frustration with the unrealistic targets, lack of clarity on grounds of justification, and more importantly, the disappointment on the consultation processes and compliance demands being placed on the sector. With a deadline for final representations set for 21 February, we are preparing yet another formal submission opposing these targets. Our position is clear: we fully support transformation, but the current EE targets do not take into account the practical constraints that agricultural businesses face.

Agriculture does not operate like industries in urban areas, where there's a steady supply of job seekers from different demographic groups. Many farms are family-owned and have been passed down for generations, which means workforce transformation happens at a slower, more organic pace. Unlike corporate sectors where employees frequently change jobs, workplaces in the agricultural sector tend to have low staff turnover, limiting opportunities for rapid demographic shifts. Skills shortages in rural areas make it even harder to meet EE targets, especially in specialised fields like farm management, irrigation engineering, and agronomy, where years of training and experience are required.

On top of workforce challenges, economic and environmental instability makes EE compliance even more difficult. Farmers are already battling climate change issues, fluctuating commodity prices, and rising input costs. Right now, survival is the priority for many farming businesses, and adding strict EE targets will only increase financial and operational strain. Instead of being given space to recover and expand, businesses now face penalties for failing to meet targets that are highly unrealistic for the agricultural sector under current conditions.

Another major concern is the lack of transparency in how DoEL will assess “justifiable reasons” for non-compliance. While the department claims businesses can submit reasons for not achieving the targets, there is no clear framework on how these justifications are to be reviewed. Many businesses fear being unfairly penalised simply because compliance officials do not understand the realities of the sector. Without a structured and consistent way of evaluating justifications, the process remains arbitrary and unpredictable, adding even more uncertainty for employers.

Because of these challenges, our submission to DoEL will firmly oppose the proposed EE targets in their current form. We are calling for a more practical, sector-specific approach that recognises the realities of agricultural employment. Compliance should not be based on rigid targets that ignore skills availability, regional challenges, economic pressures, and different subsectors in agriculture.

The Department of Employment and Labour needs to accept that not all industries can be treated the same. EE targets in agriculture must be realistic, considering skills shortages, business growth, and regional limitations. Expecting rural businesses to meet the same recruitment standards as urban industries is impractical and unfair. Compliance officials must also be properly trained to understand the agricultural sector. There also needs to be a fair and transparent process for assessing justifiable reasons for non-compliance so employers know exactly what’s required to prove recruitment challenges.

Instead of punishing businesses for missing targets they cannot realistically meet, the focus should be on real transformation, investing in skills development, mentorship programs, and training initiatives that will build a sustainable pipeline of skilled workers in agriculture. If the government is serious about meaningful change, it should be supporting long-term workforce development, not enforcing unrealistic targets that threaten the future of South African businesses.

We fully support the principles of employment equity, but we oppose the current EE targets because they are disconnected from the realities of the agricultural sector. Our submission to DoEL will stress the need for flexibility, transparency, and practical policy adjustments that drive real transformation without putting the future of agriculture at risk.

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