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Here are the key policy areas the South African government should consider to boost its agriculture in 2026

- There are a few critical policy areas that could have significant positive spinoffs to South Africa's agricultural growth if implemented effectively. The prioritisation of implementation itself would also be refreshing. Let us face it, we have spent the recent past enjoying growth delivered by technological adoption, farmers' and agribusinesses' effectiveness and efficiency, and favourable climatic conditions, rather than a strong policy-driven growth agenda.
- And by this, I am not minimising the government's efforts in various programmes and the stability they provide for the sector. But I am framing it this way to make a point that we can do better.
- We are now at the start of the year, with an opportunity to redefine the path ahead in a way that supports agribusinesses, farmers, and new entrants in the sector. This would be aimed at achieving the prime objective of delivering inclusive growth in the agricultural sector. The starting point should be:

LAND REFORM:

- The Department of Land Reform and Rural Development has, quite frankly, been dismal in 2025. We did not see any meaningful progress on land reform beyond a few high-level policy statements that sought to spark more conversation rather than implementation. Under the Pro-Active Land Acquisition Strategy, the South African government has roughly 2.5 million hectares of land. This land must be released to deserving beneficiaries with title deeds.
- The then Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, Ms Thoko Didiza, had an elegant approach to releasing this land through a Land Reform Agency, which was supported by organised agriculture and the Land Bank, amongst others. The Department of Land Reform and Rural Development must refocus on this approach.
- The failure to release this land adds to the continuous frustration of the minimal contribution of black farmers to commercial agricultural output. At the time, then-Minister Ms Thoko Didiza was looking to establish the Agency, and we had so much goodwill from various large commercial farmers that we were eager to partner with and support the programme.
- The Department of Land Reform and Rural Development must revive such conversations and reconnect with farmers. The approach, though, must not be the never-ending meetings, but more action-oriented.

EXPORT DIVERSIFICATION:

- South Africa's agriculture is export-oriented, with exports accounting for roughly half of output in value terms. We export to a range of markets across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the EU, the UK, and the Americas. Still, there remains a considerable need to expand export markets into new areas.
- The Middle East and Asia are among the fastest-growing economies, with large populations, and South Africa still has low penetration in these markets. In 2026, there should be an increased focus on this area.
- We celebrated a few export protocols last year, the result of many years of work from pre-COVID times, which were concluded in 2025. But those don't take us any closer to the level of exports we require. South Africa must seek bilateral export markets in several Asian and Middle Eastern countries. But at the same time, we must work to retain the access we have in Africa, the Americas, the EU, and the UK, amongst others.

REVIEW SACU:

- Some countries may be reluctant to engage deeply with South Africa on trade due to the Southern African Customs Union (SACU). To potential partners, the customs union often appears opaque and unpredictable. Many are interested in South Africa itself, not the wider region.
- Pretoria should therefore press for Sacu reform while preserving the development programmes that provide social support to neighbouring states. In today's changing global trade environment, countries must be agile in forming new agreements that sustain their economies. South Africa is on a path of export expansion, and when other countries see their interests aligned with South Africa's, the government must be able to sign trade agreements.
- But this is not always the reality. South Africa generally has to consult with Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho and Namibia, which are part of SACU. In the past, this practice worked well, as there was no urgency and most trade matters took years to be concluded. Negotiating as a customs union also ensured that countries interacting with the region could access a slightly larger market. But the world has changed, and each country must put its interests first.

PRIORITISE BIOSECURITY:

- For South Africa's agriculture to thrive and access new export markets, we must ensure that our plant and animal health are top-notch. In recent years, we have struggled with foot-and-mouth disease and, occasionally, African swine fever, Avian Influenza, and some plant diseases such as Goss Wilt.
- South Africa's Department of Agriculture must increase its spending and focus on biosecurity. The work, which started with collaboration with the Biosecurity Hub at the University of Pretoria, amongst other organisations, must continue.
- We also need to seriously revive the Agricultural Research Council's capabilities and be more open-minded in partnering with private-sector labs and organisations for research and vaccine manufacturing.

ADDRESS RURAL CRIME AND STOCK THEFT:

- While our agricultural sector has progressed over time, we cannot ignore the challenge of rural crime in South Africa. We often hear of farm killings and theft, which are devastating for the sector. This remains a risk to the investment and prosperity of the agricultural sector.
- Another issue is stock theft, which also continues to weigh on farmers, particularly the new entrant farmers. Statistics South Africa recently reported that in 2024/25, over 61,000 goats were stolen, followed by cattle (37,947) and poultry (36,486). I am highlighting livestock here, but I know of incidents of crop and fruit theft in some regions of the country that also require serious attention.
- This is not an exhaustive list, but starting from these points, we could see serious momentum. The organised agriculture and agribusinesses are eager to support progress in the sector.
- We all know that South Africa's agriculture has excellent growth potential, but the starting point is for the government to take steps to ease the path for others to participate.