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Beyond building a unifying and growth-enhancing vision for SA agriculture: A focus on operationalizing and implementing the plans

- When structuring growth-enhancing reforms, there is value in crafting a unifying overarching vision where each role-player has a sense of ownership, responsibility, and clarity about the possibilities of success. When such a vision is implemented, each party should continuously communicate success and glitches along the way. The success stories offer encouragement and a sense of progress while outlining the snags in the process, assisting other stakeholders in knowing that there is work underway, helping them understand the challenges, and even collaborating to resolve them. When all this is missing, a vital economic reform plan may fail to receive much-needed support and full implementation. The responsibility for any collaborative reforms lies on all parties involved to check in with each other and ensure supportive energy and focus from all sides. When there is a sense that one party is not applying themselves fully, the challenge should be rectified quickly to maintain momentum in implementation. This also helps ensure that all stakeholders keep an eye on the broader vision or outcome of the policy or programme reform.
- The South African agricultural sector had the opportunity to create an ambitious and unifying vision through the Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan (AAMP). Admittedly, the AAMP is not perfect, and some aspects were contested during its drafting stages. This is to be expected given the breadth of social partners involved in crafting it – it would be next to impossible to make everyone happy due to varied and diverse interests. Still, most social partners, such as the business community, government, and labour, agreed that the AAMP offers a framework to grow the agriculture and agro-processing sector, build competitiveness, attract more investment, improve inclusion, and create jobs. These bold prospects directly address South Africa's social challenges, such as rising poverty, low economic growth, and high unemployment. Each party involved in the AAMP has a bigger mission of resolving these broad societal challenges through relentless work in their businesses.
- Notably, the AAMP was not a fluffy document; it was rooted in evidenced-based research that outlined the possibilities for growth and the current growth-inhibiting factors. For example, growth constraints such as biosecurity, infrastructure, widening of export markets, registration of new crop protection chemicals, and various commodity-specific and regionalized plans are some of the aspects that the AAMP aimed to address. These were to be tackled simultaneously with managing the financial needs in the sector, specifically for new entrant farmers through the blended finance instrument, and the land needs for expansion through the yet-to-be-launched Land Reform and Agricultural Development Agency that was mentioned several times in the State of the Nation Address (SONA) by President Cyril Ramaphosa. The promise of these bold reforms in South Africa's agricultural economy led to estimates that the gross value added to the sector could expand by over 15% in the following decade.

- Disappointingly, the vision that excited most role-players in the agricultural sector over the past two years is beginning to wane. Various challenges took focus away from the implementation of the AAMP, such as persistent load-shedding at the start of the year, logistical constraints at ports, protectionism in export markets, and the spread of animal disease. These events meant that the government and various industry stakeholders moved into "crisis" mode, and the attention shifted from the AAMP and its promise for growth in the sector. The political economy tensions that often arise between industry role-players and government while resolving these urgent and near-term issues further strain trust and the collaborative vision. Thus, these headwinds are weighing significantly against the AAMP's prospects. Additionally, with the general elections ahead of us, the political leadership across the board may also devote more time to aspects outside the AAMP, further slowing the implementation prospects.
- Still, given the importance of this developmental and progressive plan for the sector, there is a need for leadership across all stakeholders to realign and rekindle the AAMP's vision and outline steps for implementation. Therefore, implementation and operational planning are critical across various levels of government, mainly provincial and municipal governments, to ensure alignment and coherence in policy implementation. Failure to operationalize the AAMP will be tragic for the agricultural sector and create a precedent of premature abandonment of yet another well-conceived plan that was never fully implemented. There are further negative implications that will emerge – a damaging loss of confidence in the government and questions regarding the credibility, competence and capability of the state to implement government mandates. The loss of trust will imply that any other plan in the future will not receive the seriousness and commitment it deserves. The first step may not necessarily be deeply technical but more geared towards designing implementation and operational modalities where each role-player has a sense of ownership, responsibility, and clarity about the steps they must take to see the AAMP through. Again, the government must be at the centre of this process to lead the way.