

Communication is a crucial part of policymaking

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SA's agricultural sector is finalising the sector master plan. The final consultations with constituencies of various social partners — comprising industry, government, labour and civil society — will soon begin, after which the master plan will be signed off. This document will serve as a guide for inclusive growth in the sector.

An important pillar of the master plan should be an effective communication strategy and a clear monitoring and evaluation framework. This is important for ensuring there is shared understanding of its ultimate objectives, and that the achievement of these is continuously monitored.

Every partner to the master plan should take responsibility for how this is communicated with farmers and industry groups. The government has a greater responsibility to share information and create awareness, especially in former homelands areas where organised agriculture and formal farmer forums are not a dominant feature.

In these areas, farming is predominantly on a small scale and farmers are often on the margins of policy processes and do not have powerful organisations to represent their voice. Most of these farmers are in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. These are likely to be future pivots of growth for the sector because they possess abundant land that is underutilised and hold promise as the country's food basket.

An effective communication strategy that reaches out to these underserved areas could create the needed confidence and encourage production. It is also important that farming communities in the former homelands know about the government's future plans. The government can tap into various platforms such as radio and imbizos — with Covid-19 regulations observed, and flyers in local languages.

Collaborative effort

The master plan communication strategy should aim at bridging the information gap between the government and farming communities. Human resource constraints within the government makes achieving such a feat difficult. Thus, this communication strategy should be calibrated across different provinces with priority given to those areas that have highest potential for expansion.

It is of little help to plan in Pretoria while stakeholders on the ground are not well apprised of their area's developments. Such a lack of clear communication risks creating a scenario in which local farmers and stakeholders would view the growth interventions of the master plan as something that is imposed on them, rather than a collaborative effort to help their areas develop.

In areas with formally organised agriculture groups the provincial government might also need to amplify Pretoria's message and ensure farming communities understand the policy goals and how these will be carried out. Support for the government's efforts by various

constituencies hinges on clarity in articulating policy goals. It is difficult for farmers and industry groups to support something they don't understand.

The lack of communication is, in part, what usually leads to resistance and pessimism about the government's programmes in various sections of the country. Organised structures do not represent all farmers or agribusinesses that the government interacts with in Pretoria. For such categories of farmers or agribusiness it is the government's responsibility to communicate its policies clearly and seek buy-in for public-private partnership approaches to development.

Understand focus

The vehicle of public-private partnerships is the main delivery instrument for supporting growth and inclusion of previously marginalised farmers in the agriculture sector. This is an opportunity for the government to share the master plan effectively and convince the farming community that this is a plan for all farmers and stakeholders in the sector, not for a particular grouping.

Policymakers and senior government officials should also remember that effective communication is not "a nice to do" but an integral part of policy-making. In its final stages the master plan will therefore have to be communicated widely to ensure all those involved in agriculture understand the sector's focus for the near to medium term.

Only when there is such common understanding and vision between the government and social partners will the sector be able to progress in implementing policies effectively and delivering on the objective of sustainable and inclusive growth.

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