

Eastern Cape's agricultural conditions in stark contrast to positive national picture

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This column's readers may be familiar with my optimistic views of SA's agricultural economic performance in 2021, and my most recent worries that the heavy rains could negatively affect production in provinces such as the Free State and North West.

But what I have not emphasized yet, is the contrasting picture of the Eastern Cape's agricultural economy to the broader national picture. And this is not only true for 2021 and 2022 but stretches far back.

Although the past two agricultural seasons, 2019/20 and 2020/21, resulted in a sizable crop harvest and favourable grazing conditions for livestock in much of South Africa, the Eastern Cape's picture has been mixed. Much of the northern regions, such as the former Transkei, received reasonably good rains, which supported agricultural activity. In contrast, parts of the southern and western areas stretching up towards the Karoo regions of the province have experienced dryness, which has severely affected the [farming community](#), both livestock and [horticulture producing areas](#).

This year most South Africans, including the central to northern regions of the Eastern Cape, are complaining of excessive rains that have devastated communities, agriculture, and delayed plantings for some; however, certain areas of the Eastern Cape are battling with drought. There is a real crisis in parts of the province.

Suppose one peruses the dam levels [data](#) that the Department of Water and Sanitation releases weekly; the Eastern Cape has the lowest average dam water levels compared with all provinces of South Africa. On January 24, the provincial dam levels averaged 63% full, compared with 53% on the same day in 2021. The likes of Western Cape were at 76%, KwaZulu-Natal at 84%, and Mpumalanga at 93%.

But averaging the dam level masks an even [bleaker picture](#) of lower water levels in dams such as Beervlei, Bonkolo, Darlington, Debe, Groendal, Impofu, Lake Arthur, Mlanga, Oxxkraal, Nuwejaars, Nqweba, and Wriggleswade. These Eastern Cape dams currently have water levels below 50%, which is a predicament for farmers and households in the areas these dams service.

While the excessive rains caused damage in households in the Eastern Cape and delayed plantings in the province's northern regions, some areas have not yet received much rainfall and are still facing extreme drought conditions, especially the [Karoo regions](#). Some dams have also encountered [infrastructure challenges due to poor maintenance](#), contributing to lower levels despite the heavy rains.

This contrasting picture of the Eastern Cape's water and rainfall conditions to the national picture also means that the provincial agricultural economy is not performing at its potential. The positive agricultural growth numbers we have observed nationally in 2020, about 13,4%

year-on-year, boosted by large output, could have perhaps been even more significant had the Eastern Cape received sufficient rains to unlock its production.

In the current 2021/22 production season, there are positive data from summer crop plantings of the province, specifically maize. According to preliminary plantings data from the Crop Estimates Committee, farmers planted 25 500 hectares, up by 1 500 hectares from the previous season. However, sunflower seed and soybeans plantings in the province are set to decline. The switch to maize partly caused this decline in oilseeds plantings, and importantly, the Eastern Cape's summer crop planting is primarily in wet areas (or received excessive rains). At the same time, the drier southern regions are typically livestock and horticulture.

The other less talked about difficulties of prolonged droughts are the affected farms' financial conditions and their ability to create jobs for the small towns. This is one area that will be worth closely monitoring this year. In 2021, the Eastern Cape's agricultural employment conditions were reasonably robust. In the third quarter, about 107 000 people were involved in primary agricultural production, up 10% from the same period in 2020. Still, if the entire province had had good rains, perhaps, the employment numbers would have looked even more positive.

Recently, there are also additional challenges, such as the [spreading brown locusts](#) in some grazing fields of the western and southern regions of the Eastern Cape. The locusts are destroying veld and threatening the provincial agricultural economy. The national department of agriculture colleagues I have discussed the issue with sounded optimistic that coordination between organized agriculture, farming communities and government could stop the spread of the locusts. Only time will tell if the efforts become a success, but the cooperation of all stakeholders is critical because if the spread is not stopped, it could progress even to crop areas.

Overall, the Eastern Cape's agricultural economy is not in a favourable state as most South Africa; the province faces many challenges, which this column has highlighted. Therefore, the provincial government should intensify its efforts in assisting the farming communities most affected by droughts.

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