

June 8, 2026

Key themes that dominated discussions at the Agbiz 2026 Congress

- We had two days of engaging conversations in Gqeberha, in the Eastern Cape, during the Agricultural Business Chamber of South Africa (Agbiz)'s 2026 Congress. The conversations ranged from threats posed by rising geopolitical tensions to international trade and export diversification opportunities, economic diplomacy, Southern African Customs Union (SACU) reforms, agricultural finance, and structural reforms in the South African economy, among other topics.
- From the outset, the agribusinesses deliberated on the changing trade environment, with a clear view of how to strengthen South Africa's position as one of the key agricultural exporters at a time when some markets are becoming harder to access, and conflicts are disrupting trade. The central theme in all discussions was that the African continent, the EU, the United Kingdom, the Americas, and Asia remain key markets for South Africa. The country must work to maintain and deepen access in these markets, while also expanding access for products that do not yet enjoy preferential or lower-tariff access.
- Reflecting on the medium to long-term outlook, there was broad consensus that the Middle East and Asia remain critical strategic regions with potential to expand access to various agricultural products. These are the agricultural export growth regions, in addition to the access we enjoy elsewhere. Securing better tariff access to several of these new markets will require South Africa to negotiate bilateral trade agreements with some countries.
- It is in this desire for better access to new markets that the various participants and speakers at the Congress noted the need for South Africa to align its foreign policy and trade policy more rigorously going forward. Fortunately, we received a word of comfort from the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) that the new Economic Diplomacy has begun to prioritise trade and investment much more strongly than before. There was, however, recognition that a stronger economic diplomacy strategy alone will not suffice. We also need well-equipped people at South Africa's missions around the world. South Africa has over 100 missions globally, which should play a vital role in promoting trade and investment opportunities in South Africa, amongst other things. This is an area that agricultural stakeholders will continue to advance through various engagements with the government.
- Also prominent in the discussions in Gqeberha was the need to urgently review SACU, with the end goal of allowing South Africa some flexibility to engage in bilateral trade agreements. In the current set-up, where South Africa must engage on trade issues collectively with other SACU members, the country has not moved quickly enough or with the necessary urgency to open new markets to serve South African business and society. The world is changing, and countries are forming new trade agreements. South Africa risks being left behind if our approach to SACU is not urgently reviewed.

- Moreover, trade agreements alone will not be enough to boost exports. Thus, we devoted one afternoon to focusing on reforms in the network industries. Improving the efficiency of ports and rail was the key issue that arose from the network industries discussion. The input from the Transnet leadership was that they are open to collaboration with organised agriculture, agribusiness, and private-sector stakeholders to ensure continued improvement. Rural crime is among the issues discussed, as it typically hinders agricultural growth and investment in the sector.
- Also worth noting is that the delegates at the Congress devoted time to discussing biosecurity, including both plant and animal health issues. South Africa has been plagued by foot and mouth disease and African swine fever, all presenting immense costs to the sector. Thus, a discussion of long-term interventions to address these issues and improve plant health was part of the conference agenda.
- Overall, the Agbiz 2026 Congress's discussions centred on deepening collaboration between government, business, organised agriculture, and other social partners to ensure the sector continues to grow.