

The President on the news



In a recent interview with SABC 3 Business News's Naledi Molefi, she asked Motsepe Matlala, President of NAFU SA, what his views are on the research conducted by the Centre for Development and Enterprise.

Q: It has been revealed that the failure in implementing land reform policies, threaten agricultural production, investor confidence and race relations. Do you agree?

A: We do not believe that land reform threatens agricultural production and, on the contrary, when land reform is done within a defined timeframe and is genuinely negotiated at political level, it can actually boost agricultural production. The next level needing attention will be the support to farmers through a well-planned and executed programme.

Investors would rather have issues of land reform resolved once and for all. A delay in land reform makes investors jittery. Government and indigenous stakeholders must pace up delivery on land reform, so that investors can also participate in agriculture without fear of politics.

We are worried about the continued professionally calculated and sophisticated racism that underpins the agricultural sector. White people say that they are non-political, yet their actions present them as the biggest politicians.

Q: The research also revealed that 50% of land reform projects failed to make their beneficiaries better off. Why is that the case?

A: The main issue relates to the attitudes within the key implementing institutions. Land reform is not simply about abandoning people on commercial farms. No! There is a need for follow-up and support of the beneficiaries. This has largely not happened, chiefly because bureaucrats tasked to do this work are not doing so. Clearly there is a lack of capacity in government to support farmers.

Q: Apparently the private sector plays a more meaningful role in land reform than government. Do you think that forming partnership will help alleviate the problem?

A: We get worried when there seems to be a movement in the farming circles lauding the private sector as the key agency in land reform. Far from it, we believe that the responsibility for land reform lies with government – period. It is good that the democratic dispensation allowed black South Africans to acquire commercial land even in private circumstances. They must be supported. However, there is need for the state to play a much more active role in land acquisition and resettlement. For this reason the buck stops with the Ministry of Land Affairs and Agriculture.

Q: Do you agree with the notion that special attention should be given to commercial farmers who benefit from economies of scale rather than developing small-scale farmers?

A: From a food security perspective we believe that both large-scale and small-scale farmers can co-exist. Small-scale is about addressing the historical injustices, while also providing them opportunities for income and livelihood. The commercial large-scale sector benefitting from economies of scale, are needed to produce food and agricultural raw materials for the urban sector and as well as for exports. There are also other downstream benefits such as employment creation and so on that can benefit our people.

Q: Are large-scale farms more competitive in the current economic conditions?

A: The sector faces competition and pressure from countries such as India and Brazil that can produce the same agricultural goods competitively. Commercial farmers pay tax like anybody

else, yet they struggle with little government support and almost zero subsidies. Other countries dump their agricultural products in South Africa, but the rise in world food price has shown the insecurity that can come with world food trade. We believe that the sector can be competitive, as long as government plays its part of protecting and supporting the South African commercial farmer.

Q: What are the challenges faced by farmers in the current economic conditions of rising food prices?

A: The fact of the matter is that our farmers have not gotten the support to produce food for the nation. Agriculture is not taken seriously in this country and the world food prices exposed the fallacy that other sectors which generate foreign currency, can feed our people. The prices of basic inputs remain high, technological innovation and research remain skewed, and markets for both inputs and outputs are manipulated and depressed by middle agents.

Q: What are the challenges facing black farmers in particular?

A: The black farmer in South Africa is cursed by history and by continued attitude in the sector. Black farmers have inadequate or no land at all. When provided with or if they have land, they are not supported through skills or resources. We find that universities and tertiary institutions do not support our farmers, yet to develop agriculture there is a need for research and development. The issue of financial resources is another painful issue.

Q: What do you think has led to the apparent failure of land restitution in the country?

A: The starting point is obviously that land reform, even in the form of restitution, is not about dumping people in commercial farms. In a

way, bureaucrats did not support the programme fully as well and ended up only giving people options of taking money rather than the land. The money so given is proving to be unsustainable, as the people who were supposed to benefit are again languishing in poverty.

Q: What do you think led to the land which was under restitution claim, being frozen?

A: When land is claimed under restitution the obvious reaction by the landholders is to stop production and investment on the property. But on the other hand the new claimants cannot move onto the land until the restitution case has been settled by the courts. At the same time we are in agreement that government has little capacity and experience to pace up land reform, hence some properties remain in limbo for a long time without production.

Q: What do you think created the perception that the market and white farmers have been manipulating prices upwards?

A: The prices of land continue to escalate and these markets quickly react when government threatens to use the constitutionally allowed expropriation. The fact of the matter is that the so-called free markets will not deliver a just agrarian system in South Africa. Leaving markets alone is a myth, because "markets are created and markets can be shaped". It is never a sacred arena. Hence the government needs to intervene and control the prices of land for land reform to happen without hindrance.

This article has been edited and shortened due to limited space. For a full, unedited version, go to our website at www.nafufarmer.co.za 