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Agricultural Trade in Africa: Constraints

Dr John Lapham

Agricultural activities across Sub-Saharan Africa have always accounted for a significant part of all economies. Currently, the sector provides for three-quarters of employment and contributes to a third of the gross domestic product (GDP) for the area. Despite this, and with its vast agricultural potential, Africa changed from a net exporter of food to a net importer of food in the 1980's. This food-trade deficit has persisted and increased, and is a problem especially in cash strapped countries where shortages of foreign currency only exacerbate the difficulty of paying the ever-increasing, national food bills.

Both high-income and low-income countries have net food imports, but high-income countries do not have a problem paying the food bills as they have ample resources of foreign currency. Low-income countries import less food per capita, but their agricultural export revenues, and sometimes even their total merchandise export revenues, do not cover the cost of their smaller food import bills. These countries have the lowest yields and productivity, and any increase in their agricultural performance would help to reduce food import bills.

Over the years boosting agricultural performance has been extensively investigated and the constraints to improved performance have been analysed, identified and discussed. The food consumption per capita has not increased in these countries, only the population; the inability of these countries to provide food for their growing populations results in ever-increasing food imports and this must be used as the baseline to judge any improvement.

Constraints to production are varied, but common causes are the decreasing arable land available per person, limited access to inputs (quality seed, fertiliser and water), slow adoption of technology, degradation of infrastructure and social insecurity. These technical constraints often arise from distorting policies and weak institutional support affecting the flow of food trade in and between these countries. Agricultural trade between African countries is even less than exports out of the continent.

However, the role and the circumstances of the individual small-scale farmer in any strategy for change must not be neglected. They produce over 80% of the food and capacitating them with the means for improved production is essential. They operate on the principle of "low-input – low return and low risk." They are aware of the benefits of various inputs and technologies but adopting and investing in them comes with a high risk; any crop failure would mean food insecurity and ever-persistent financial debt for them. This means they are trapped in a low-productivity system that is becoming increasingly difficult for survival.

To improve productivity, the first step is to break this cycle of poverty; a strategy is being developed and implemented in many places. Financial models are being used to provide farmers with insurance in poor or during disastrous seasons which will enable them not only to weather poor times, but also to more easily consider improved production practices and technologies during the good times. This requires good institutional support and even involvement of the private sector, which is happening. It also requires understanding, willingness to participate and acceptance from the farmers.



Dr John Lapham

ESO

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Liven up your computer's desktop with an Extension Suite Online® wallpaper. Download wallpapers directly from the ESO newsletter e-mail or on the ESO media website: media.esuite.co.za



Tips and tools for advisors

Soil Preparation - Cultivating the Soil

Portia Phahlane

An important requirement for an eventual good harvest starts with proper soil preparation. Soil is an important medium in crop production and crops don't grow well in hard, unprepared ground. Ploughing/cultivating the soil is important as it helps in breaking crusty soil surfaces.

Benefits of turning and loosening the soil before planting:

- Loosened soil allows the roots to penetrate freely deeper into the soil and deep roots hold plants more firmly.
- Loosened soil allows for easier penetration of air, water, and nutrients.
- Microbes and worms also prefer more loose soil.
- Newly germinated seeds easily sprout out in prepared soil.
- Prepared soil improves moisture penetration.
- Interruption of weed seed germination and removal of weeds are accomplished.

ESO User

Portia Phahlane

Talking about Extension Suite Online® utilisation, is not only about national and provincial Top Users deserving recognition for their efforts of professionally advising and supporting the food producers of our country. The real stars are those whose names appear continuously in the Top Ten of their respective provinces. They are the backbone of extension services in South Africa, and we are thrilled to introduce one of them to you this month: Mr. Ernest Oitsing from the Northern Cape. During 2017, Ernest has consistently been one of the monthly top users in his province, while he was amongst the top three users in the Northern Cape during the whole of 2016 - a real pillar of Extension!

Ernest is from Kuruman, a town made famous originally with the founding of the London Missionary Society by Robert Moffatt there in 1821; as well as the famous "Eye of Kuruman" - a geological wonder - bringing water from deep underground to the surface in this arid area. Farming is mainly with cattle, sheep, and goats.

Ernest is an agricultural advisor who focuses on both cattle and crop production. He started working for the provincial Department of Agriculture in February 1997 (20-years' service this year!), and currently works in the John Taolo Gaetsewe District Municipality - serving in the three local municipalities Joe Morolong, Gasekgonyana, and Ga Mokgara, where he reports directly to the District Director Mr. Patrick Tonyane. According to Ernst, he finds pleasure in helping people with all their farming activities.

Ernest has used ESO since its introduction to the Northern Cape Team in 2010, and makes weekly visits to the system, especially when he must prepare presentations, but often also when he requires information on specific issues that he needs to advise farmers on.

He uses the Economics Module regularly, particularly the Gross Enterprise Budget. He uses the Animal Module on cattle production for information on the different breeds, calves rearing, and adaptability. For crop information, he visits vegetable and fruit production to get information on crop diseases and fertiliser applications.

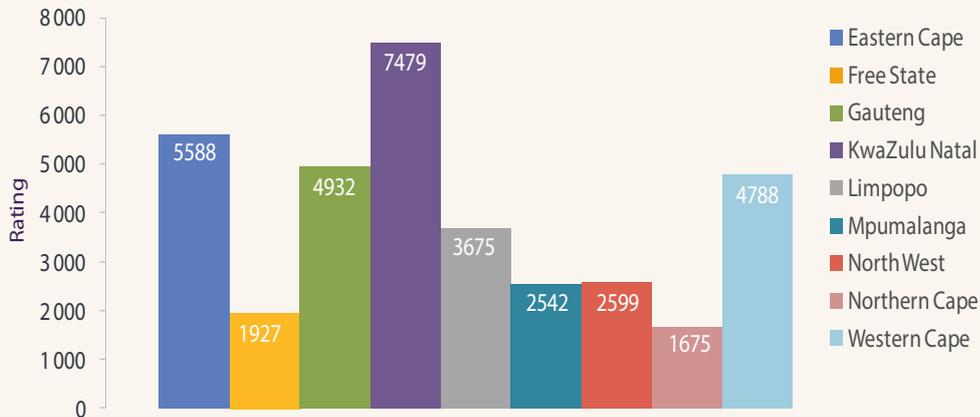
He says that the system has all the basic information that farmers may need, allowing him to empower them with valuable knowledge. Using the system, he can supply non-accredited farmer-training on subjects like starting vegetable gardens, while it helps him with monitoring and advising farmers during the production cycle.

In conclusion, Ernest says the strength of ESO is based on reliable information that one can take straight from ESO to the farmer, while the Discussion Forum allows users to interact with each other.

EXTENSION SUITE ONLINE® UTILISATION: August 2017

Extension Suite Online® (ESO) utilisation is determined through monitoring user utilisation in the nine provinces and by attaching values to Visits, Pages Visited and Duration of Visits. A rating is then calculated to establish the ESO National Top User of the Month.

ESO PROVINCIAL TOP USER GRAPH



ESO PROVINCIAL TOP USERS

Province	Name
Eastern Cape	Sindile Magoda
Free State	Lesimole Esther
Gauteng	Vhuthu Gavhi
KwaZulu-Natal	Dumisani Nzama
Limpopo	Louis Khomola
Mpumalanga	Sithembiso Mbuyane
North West	Tsholanang Molosiwa
Northern Cape	Johan le roux
Western Cape	Riaan Nowers

CLIMATE WATCH

Issue #20

Rainfall during August occurred mainly over the Western and Eastern Cape provinces, and KwaZulu-Natal. Rain in these provinces were regularly accompanied by cold fronts as they made landfall over the Western Cape, before moving north eastward bringing rain and snow. Despite the regular cold fronts, rainfall produced by these systems remained relatively small, not exceeding 10 mm in most instances. Read more...



Read the full article on the Manstrat AIS website.

www.manstrat.co.za - Climate Watch

ESO TIPS:

Mary Mavengere

Basic Computer Tips for Easy Web Page Use

When completing input boxes on a Web page, press the **Tab** key to move from one box to the next. To go back, use the **Shift + Tab** keys.

We often forget to use quote/unquote (" ") when doing a multiple-word search, so next time remember to "lock" words that refer to a particular concept in quotes to get the most out of your Google search. Be specific as it can save a lot of time - if you want information on farming in South Africa, type "Farming in South Africa" in, and see the difference.

Lastly, when working in a web browser, press the backspace key to go back to the previous page. Enjoy.

National ESO Top User



Congratulations to **Dumisani Nzama** the ESO National Top User for **August 2017**.

Do you have any technology related questions? Send them to newsletter@esuite.co.za, with your name, province and the question and we will answer them in a following newsletter edition.

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