

Empowerment through farming

Government's move to establish agri parks as a way to transform rural communities has sparked much debate. amaVeg in Komatipoort has successfully broken into the local and export markets and is proof that the agri parks concept can work. Lindi Botha reports.

AmaVeg is a thriving, 85ha vegetable farm in Komatipoort, Mpumalanga. It forms part of the Timbali Technology Incubator, a non-profit organisation started in 2003, to provide technical skills and technology to clusters of small-scale farmers. The aim of the project is to enable these farmers to compete with commercial farmers.

amaVeg is just one of the many successful agri parks Timbali has created in recent years and is proof that, if managed correctly, agri parks can help unemployed youth become successful farmers.

Operations manager for amaVeg, John Mangani, is an agronomist from Zimbabwe. He has spent most of his life involved

in various farming businesses, and has been with amaVeg since its inception in 2015. He says the farm provides jobs to nearly 100 people from marginalised communities, and specifically targets women and young people between the age of 18 and 35.

The farm mostly produces baby vegetables for the export market, and sells about 4t a month. Yellow patty pans, baby marrows and baby brinjals are its star sellers. The farm also plants green patty pans, green beans and chillies.

A VIABLE MODEL

When amaVeg started its operation, it received over 1 500 applications. The selecting process required that applicants were able to perform basic

FAST FACTS

- amaVeg agri park provides jobs to 100 people.
- Produce is supplied to local and export markets.
- Unemployed youth are taught to be independent, successful farmers.

farming tasks, such as weeding 100m of land a day. They were also assessed on how quickly they could plant seedlings.

"We really tested their speed and commitment. Eventually we ended up with this group of 40 farmers," explains Mangani.

A few of the applicants had a farming background, and some had worked as general labourers on other farms. The majority were unemployed and eager to find a way to feed their families.

BELOW: amaVeg produces green beans, amongst other vegetables, on 85ha, and supplies to local retail and fresh produce markets. PHOTOS: LINDI BOTHA





About 90% of the employees are female. Men predominantly make up the support staff, who drive the tractors or do the heavy lifting in the packhouse.

Mangani says the project was not purposely female-driven, but when they started the recruitment process, they quickly realised that most of the men did not have the soft touch needed to farm baby vegetables.

"These vegetables need to be delicately handled, and we found most of the produce coming from the men was bruised. The men lack patience. Women are naturally more careful. We also found the women were more reliable."

The 40 farmers are grouped into teams of five. They farm 1ha at a time to ensure that the baby vegetables are managed and harvested optimally.

By the end of the season, each farmer has been responsible for and gained an income from at least 2ha.

TOP: amaVeg farmers, from left: Nontokozi Ndlovu, Queen Monyane, Florence Dladla, Ellen Mawalela, Noliswe Mashabane and cluster coordinator, Jooma Chitenje.

ABOVE RIGHT: John Mangani, operations manager at amaVeg.

ABOVE: Shoprite's Freshmark brand procures vegetables from amaVeg.

PLANTING AND MANAGEMENT

Mangani explains that baby vegetables require the farmer's full attention.

"You must be on the farm the whole time. If you leave the vegetables for two days you can see it in the quality."

'BABY VEGETABLES NEED TO BE DELICATELY HANDLED'

"There is also a limited time in which you can harvest to meet the size requirement; I check each block every morning." Experience has taught him what to look for.

"If the vegetables look a certain way in the morning, I know what they will look like by the end of the day, and at what point they must be harvested." Seedlings are planted by hand,

and the farmers are responsible for the general maintenance and harvesting of each block. Mangani manages crop protection and fertigation. He also ensures a soil analysis is done annually, and that the fertiliser programme is properly implemented.

"I involve the farmers in everything I do. Even though they are not responsible for crop protection and irrigation at this stage, they must still understand the principles and the impact it has on the bottom line, both from a cost and profit perspective."

Once harvested, the produce is sent to the on-farm packhouse, where it is graded for the different markets and then shipped out.

The farmers are paid according to what each block has produced, minus the input costs and levy they pay for the use of the land. Mangani says that profitability remains a challenge, as input prices have gone up, but producer prices have remained the same.

The farm's location means vegetables can mostly be planted only in winter, due to high summer temperatures. Therefore, amaVeg shuts down during January, when the markets are quiet, and resumes again in February. They start with soil preparation and consult with their markets to find out what quantities of particular vegetables are needed each week. Seedlings are planted accordingly.

amaVeg sells mostly to export markets in Europe and to the Shoprite Group's Freshmark label in South Africa. Lower-grade vegetables are sold wholesale to the local fresh produce markets.

FINDING MARKETS

Mangani admits that when the project was launched, Timbali didn't know much about the different markets.

"The previous owner of the farm introduced us to Freshmark. However, Freshmark only procured from us if its other suppliers could not make up an order, so it was inconsistent.

"We proved ourselves with our good, consistent quality and today we have a good supply contract with them. Last year they increased the supply demand by 33%."

Mangani says greater profits lie in the export market, and amaVeg is aiming to increase the produce it sends to Europe.

"In 2016 we exported 30% of our produce [to Europe], and today it's 50%. This year we want to push it to 70% to increase the profitability of our farmers."

MAKING AN IMPACT

Since most of the farmers at amaVeg were previously unemployed, the opportunity created by this agri park has been life-changing.

Mangani says that his goal is to get the workers to the point where they are bona fide farmers, operating independently and earning decent salaries that will improve their quality of life.

"We are still in the development



stage, but eventually these farmers will function on their own. So we include them in our monthly meetings and explain the finances on a level they can understand. Each cluster can see exactly how much money they brought in and what the expenses were. They can then see first-hand where the problem areas are on the balance sheet and what they need to do to become more profitable. We show them clearly where they have failed and how they can rectify it."

Asked why he would rather manage other farmers than farm for himself, Mangani says he is passionate about farming, but also wanted to be a part of something bigger. "I want to be able to make a difference in people's lives and see a change."

THE MAJORITY OF THE FARMERS WERE INITIALLY UNEMPLOYED

Despite his tireless dedication, he believes he has not yet achieved his goal. "Once these farmers are independent and driving their own cars, then I will say I have succeeded. They must be able to sustain themselves when I am not around."

He says another challenge when they started amaVeg was the community's negative

Successful farmers

Nelisiwe Mashabane (27) joined amaVeg in 2015 and is one of the 40 farmers who are part of the agri park. She was previously a labourer on a neighbouring farm and is proud to have spent the past three years learning first-hand about farming and running a business. "When I started at amaVeg, I didn't know anything about the different markets and the specs that each requires," she says. "Now I understand the whole value chain. I know what is needed to produce a crop that is export quality, how to plant, look for diseases and the importance of the soil. Previously I had no opportunity to start a business and work with a budget. Now I have all of those skills."

Florence Dladla (37) also started working at amaVeg in 2015, and says that it was a huge opportunity for her because she was previously unemployed: "I have gained so many skills in terms of farming and running a business. Last year I asked if I could spend some time in the packhouse to understand what happens there. One day when I am independent I will be able to handle the packaging myself," she says.

perceptions. "They saw us as just another government project that would not get off the ground. It made us determined to prove them wrong. Now it is satisfying to know we have succeeded.

"Shoprite even came to shoot one of their TV advertisements on our farm. We were very proud. For us to be chosen says a lot about what we are doing here."

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ABOVE: amaVeg supplies wholesale vegetables to South Africa's fresh produce markets.