



Level the field

In 2003, along with three researchers and 12 women, Louise de Klerk started Timbali Technology Incubator – an NPO which enables small-scale commercial farmers to create sustainable wealth. Today it serves roughly 450 farmers in Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

Timbali means flower in siSwati; a perfect choice of name to start farming with gerberas. "We were looking for a green gold which could offer opportunities to local communities," says Louise, Timbali's CEO. "Almost like rooibos tea in the Cape, but the gerbera is local." Timbali found a way to connect low-skilled, young, inexperienced, unemployed rural people (75% of whom are women), to sophisticated markets by means of its incubation product supply chain and an enabling environment created in Agri-parks.

"Today, depending on the season, one out of every four or five gerberas bought in South Africa is produced by our farmers," Louise boasts deservedly. "You can buy

anabliom's gerberas in the entire Gauteng, East London, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and even in Namibia." They also have brands that are exported, like amaSpice and amaVeg. After the flowers, Timbali tackled basil and other herbs; then it moved over to baby vegetables which it started producing for Woolworths. "We decided to cut our teeth and match Woolies' standards," she states with intent.

Louise paraphrases a passage from a book by Marty Neumeier: "When everybody is zigging, you must be zagging." And that is just what Timbali did. When everyone was interested in approaching urban qualified entrepreneurs, they said, "No, thanks." The NPO wanted



Ngobeni in her tunnel of gerberas



Phindile Maphanga with her lily of the valley

with rural, unemployed youths and people who don't have the means to start their own million-rand businesses. "We want to grow in South Africa, to be competitive," Louise adds. "Economic growth is virtually impossible without competitiveness, Timbali brings farmers together. According to the franchise model, there is a level of discipline and control," Louise says. "It's not a management structure that makes more like a game." She says

services and bulk buying are shared within these clusters, which means the economy of scale tips in favour of the smallholder farmer. Besides the idea of clustering, Timbali also follows a franchising management model, similar to McDonalds. "We started a prototype where we created an enabling environment of impeccable order, where there is discipline and control," Louise says. They have three farms in Mpumalanga and one in Limpopo; they all follow the exact same system - "like a real franchise" - and they had a 100% success rate during the first year of business.

There are 10 product, services and facilities (PSF) officers and 150 farmers at Nwanedi Agri-park in Limpopo. Each farmer rents their own property and each PSF officer has a group of 15 small-scale farmers to manage. "After four years of following this model, the supply chain stays in place for those 150 farmers," Louise explains. "The local people drive the system and Timbali takes a step back." Timbali developed a supply chain which connects the farmers to the market. Its philosophy is if you are in the market, it doesn't matter if your mentorship retracts

the market will become the mentor. "We ask ourselves the following questions," Louise says. "How do you get new entrants into cut-throat markets? How do you find ways to combine profitability with high social impact? And how do you lower the cost barriers that keep people out of supply chains?" She explains how in South Africa's past, the boss was everything in a top-down structure. "But we are living on the brink of the fourth industrial revolution of Facebook, where everyone has a voice." Timbali has

an inclusive, group decision-making model where everyone has a say - instead of one superior calling all the shots, Louise believes that inequality is South Africa's greatest problem. "A lot of people are critical towards black economic empowerment, but there are so many people who can do the job - they just aren't given the opportunity. Alucia Ngobeni and Phindile Maphanga are good examples."

For Louise, "the proof is in eating the pudding". For the past four years amaVeg farmers have consistently exported 40% of their baby vegetables, 40% goes to retail

and they sell 20% to wholesale markets. She is hopeful and optimistic about the future and our country's National Development Plan, due to its strategic objective to create a platform where people can make choices how best to use limited resources. "That is what we do," Louise adds, as she talks about levelling the playing field. "We connect people to the market, we put up a scoreboard and then... the games begin."

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