



SUPPORT PROGRAMMES THAT ARE TARGETING WOMEN MUST BE UPSCALED: THE CASE OF **SMALLHOLDER MAIZE PRODUCERS**

Kayaletu **Sotsha**, Bernard **Manganyi**, Khathutshelo **Rambau** & Dineo **Chiloane**



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KEY POINTS

- Women play an essential role in the four pillars related to food security, which is, availability, accessibility, utilization and stability, yet gender disparity in ownership of productive resources such as land is still huge.
- Efforts to improve gender equality and women's participation in the agriculture's mainstream economy must be upscaled.
- The land reform programme and the public-private partnerships (PPPs), as envisaged in the Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan (AAMP), are crucial to inclusive growth of the agriculture and agro-processing sectors, to food security rural poverty reduction.

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recognizes the significant contribution of women to food security and nutrition, despite being marginalized when it comes access to land and credit compared to their male counterparts. Other gender disparities are also acknowledged in relation to participation in the mainstream economy and wages, among others. The United Nations (UN) noted an estimation that over 2.5 billion women and girls live in countries with at least one discriminatory law on the books, implying restriction of women's ability to make socio-economic decisions about their lives. The UN further estimates that less 62% of women are in the labour, compared to 93% of men, while 25% of women are more likely than men to live in extreme poverty. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly SDG 5, aims to address these inequalities by promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

In the case of South Africa, the gender inequality in the agriculture sector is exacerbated by structural issues, where the country's agriculture sector is still characterized by duality with the commercial farming sector dominating in terms of access to resources (e.g., land) and output while it is still lagging in addressing smallholder farmers' integration into the mainstream economy. This is important because agriculture in South Africa is regarded as an engine for driving economic growth, reduction of poverty, unemployment, inequality and improving food security.

Efforts to include smallholder farmers in the mainstream value chain have been ongoing, yet challenges persist despite interventions such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Broadening Access to Agriculture Thrust (BATAT), the White Paper on Agriculture, White Paper on Land Policy, Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme (CASP), the National Development Plan (NDP), among others.

The signed AAMP envisages a globally competitive agricultural and agro-processing sectors driving market oriented and inclusive production to develop rural economies, ensure food-security, and create employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. In addition, the AAMP emphasized the importance of PPPs in driving this vision and transforming the agriculture and agro-processing sectors by increasing the share of production of black farmers and agro-processors.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC) uses the Smallholder Market Access Tracker (SMAT) as a tool to measure the progress in achieving the market access goal for smallholder farmers in South Africa. The aim is to conduct baseline studies on various commodities and begin tracking from the baseline. The SMAT maize baseline conducted in the 2023/24 financial year compares a range of maize farmers from those having access to a hectare to those having access to as much as 680 hectares.

Farmers were put in different categories based on their land size. Category 1 represented farmers with access to 1-5 hectares. Farmers in the second category have access to 5.3-20 hectares, while the third, fourth and fifth categories represented farmers with access to 21-100 hectares, 120-350 hectares and 400-680 hectares, respectively. These farmers constitute an availability sample of 332 farmers drawn from six provinces, namely Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, North West, Limpopo, Eastern Cape and Gauteng.

The SMAT maize baseline report reveals that female farmers dominate the 1–5-hectare category (57%), whereas male farmers dominate the remaining categories. Furthermore, the 1–5-hectare category is dominated by farmers who have primary education or less, implying that these farmers are less equipped to seek, acquire, process, interpret, and analyze the information necessary for their farming endeavours. In addition to farming, a majority of farmers in this category (35%) rely on social grants and pensions.

Farmers in the 1-5-hectare category typically lose money because their expenses are larger than their income. The expenses include labour, pesticides, weed control, fertilisers, hiring implements, transport, loan repayment, seed, and packaging. One explanation is that they consume a greater proportion of what they produce than farmers in other categories. Farmers in the Eastern Cape are the least profitable, with a loss of R5 510, followed by Mpumalanga (-R3 670), North West (-R2 765), and KwaZulu-Natal (-R1 883). Limpopo was the only profitable province, with R1 850. Despite farming at a loss, farmers in this category employ two to four workers during a specific period of the production season.

On average, the sample farmers have access to 58 hectares, but the gender comparison indicates that female farmers fall below the average, with access to 41 hectares, compared to their male counterparts

who have access to 74 hectares. The ownership status does not show marked differences by gender. Many farmers (55%) across both genders and all categories have permission to occupy (PTO) the land they use. Some farmers rely mainly on informal arrangements, borrowing unutilized land from friends, family, and neighbours within their communities. Others are land reform beneficiaries without formal secure tenure. Some farmers (26%) have secured land rights through a title deed, while others (16%) have lease agreements. The remaining 3% include farmers who inherited the land but might not have formal private ownership rights.

Access to credit is a challenge for both males and females with only 17% of farmers who have used credit, a majority of them being males (73%). Even so, 86% of females who have used credit borrowed from fellow farmers, family members, informal money lenders and development finance institutions, compared to 60% of male farmers who used the same sources. Notably, a high proportion of farmers who borrowed from the Land Bank and other commercial banks is represented by male farmers (93%).

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Increase access to land, coupled with comprehensive farmer support and market access, implying that efforts to address the structural imbalances in South Africa's agriculture sector through land redistribution, comprehensive farmer support and market access must be intensified and prioritize women and youth targeting.

Access to land. The lack of secure property ownership discourages and limits long-term investments and fixed improvements, thereby inhibiting the growth of smallholder farmers. Hence, the land reform policy remains the key to promoting equality and inclusive growth in the agricultural sector.

Comprehensive farmer support. Comprehensive support is crucial to address structural imbalances. It includes providing technical (training, mentorship, research and development), financial (reducing barriers to access to finance in the form of blended finance and affordable credit which meets the farmers' needs), infrastructure support (irrigation and water-use rights, roads, and other supporting infrastructure such as rail and port infrastructure), and access to energy.

Market access. It is not sufficient to address the issue of access to land and increasing provision

of comprehensive farmer development support without including market access. Market access is key to sustainable farmer development as it boosts productivity and efficiency, while increasing income and improving/contributing to food security, poverty reduction and job creation. This relates to improving the ability of farmers to comply with the food safety standards and meeting the market requirements in the form of correct packaging, grading and labelling. Increasing biosecurity controls is also key to maintaining global competitiveness and opening new market opportunities.

CONCLUSION

A lot has been done to address the structural imbalances in South Africa in the form of the land reform programme, comprehensive farmer development policy, the integrated market strategy, and various industry initiatives that seek to drive transformation in the agriculture sector. However, the challenges faced by the smallholder farmers, and women in particular, persist. Hence intensifying or upscaling these efforts is crucial. Appreciating that there is still a long way to go to ensure a transformed, competitively and inclusively growing agriculture sector, the AAMP emphasizes private-public partnerships (PPPs). The PPPs encourage aligning numerous efforts by various role players while breaking the silos.

Moreover, access to land, support and markets must always be linked together to ensure a sustained development impact. As such, the alignment of targets by various role players and leveraging various funding sources such as industry trust funds, Ilima/Letsema, the Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme (CASP), as well as private investment, among others, will be optimized. It also needs that farmers have a role to play by striving to keep records both at the production and marketing levels as well as working together to increase their bargaining power.

SOURCES

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