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## WANDILE SIHLOBO: Black farmers of Eastern Cape reap harvest of success

**While the contribution by black farmers to agricultural production seems minimal from this data, keep in mind that this was collected 16 years ago**

BL PREMIUM

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Lundi Kama, from Elliot in the Eastern Cape, is one of the emerging black farmers who are transforming the racial make-up of agriculture in South Africa. Picture: Michael Pinyana

South Africans are a very inquisitive nation. Each time I tweet about South Africa's agricultural fortunes, someone asks about proportions of that particular product in racial terms.

This past week, I posted a chart about liquor consumption - 76% of it is accounted for by beer. Almost immediately, the question popped up - what proportion of the barley and sorghum used to make the beer was grown by black farmers?

The most recent data we have that comes close to responding to this question deals with the separation of key crops - mainly grains and oilseeds - into commercial and non-commercial.

However, it still doesn't provide a clear-cut answer because it would be unreasonable to assume that black farmers are responsible for all non-commercial farming.

Granted, a large share might be smallholder black farmers, but there are also black farmers who produce commercially, and white farmers who produce non-commercially.

**40%**

The estimated percentage of cattle in SA owned by emerging and communal black farmers

The best information I have found regarding agricultural production along racial lines is contained in a PhD thesis by the late George Frederick "Frikkie" Liebenberg of the University of Pretoria.

Unfortunately, Liebenberg's data set ends in 2002 and is therefore outdated. This data simply does not provide the most recent production statistics.

One of the key takeaways from it is that black people accounted for 31% of the land being farmed - "farmed", as opposed to "owned" - in 2002.

This area produced less than 4% of field crops such as maize, wheat and sorghum.

Black farmers, Liebenberg found, accounted for 10% of sheep production and 29% of poultry. They grew an estimated 17% of our pumpkins.

While the contribution by black farmers to agricultural production seems minimal from this data, keep in mind that this was collected 16 years ago.

There has definitely been progress in the recent past, spurred by government-driven land reform programmes, as well as transfers of privately held land from white to black farmers.

In the livestock sector, the most recent estimates presented by trade economist Sifiso Ntombela of the Agricultural Business Chamber suggest that about 40% of cattle in South Africa are owned by emerging and communal black farmers. But a large proportion of this herd doesn't enter into the meat supply chain.

There has been progress driven by the government and the private sector

Ntombela also estimates that in the fruit industry, the contribution of black smallholder farmers is about 16% of overall production.

This week in Business Day I highlighted recent progress made in the grain industry in the Eastern Cape.

In 2013, black farmers in the Matatiele area of the province were producing 6000 tons of maize on roughly 1200ha.

By 2017 the area planted with maize had increased to 4000ha and the harvest was 28000 tons, according to data from Matatiele Grainco.

At the moment, black farmers in Matatiele, Ugie and Maclear in the Eastern Cape are preparing field trials for various dryland winter wheat cultivars.

The wool, livestock and horticultural industries have also been engaged in transformation and producer-support programmes in the province over the past couple of years, which I believe has somewhat changed the picture from what was recorded in 2002.

Such programmes were not limited to the Eastern Cape; other provinces also have them, and hopefully are making progress.

Unfortunately, we do not have a clear data set which can cast a macro view on these issues, which makes it difficult to measure the progress made thus far in terms of transformation.

Clearly, the racial question cannot be easily answered in the absence of statistics. However, there are signs and indications that transformation in the sector is under way given the increase in the land holdings of black farmers, some of whom are entering commercial farming.

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