

Zimbabwe's wilting wheat output offers many lessons

By Wandile Sihlobo, [Business Day](#), 30 August 2018

The last time Zimbabwe was nearly self-sufficient in wheat production was in 2001, with a harvest of about 325,000t. After nearly two decades, production declined to a mere 20,000t as a consequence of bad policy decisions.

The government embarked on an ambitious investment plan in 2017 to revive wheat production. This was a plausible initiative following increasing bread and other wheaten product consumption. This plan entailed production loan schemes for acquiring inputs such as seeds, fertiliser, agrochemicals and irrigation facilities. Disappointingly, there has been no change in wheat area planted and subsequent harvest outcome.

The government had hoped its production scheme would lead to an increase in wheat-area plantings to about 50,000ha, but this fell short at only 10,000ha, according to data from the US agriculture department. The reluctance to expand wheat plantings was due to price competitiveness, with farmers favouring maize, tobacco and other crops. Zimbabwean agricultural economist Admire Chawarika [points out](#) in an article in the *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development* that this is mainly caused by higher input costs and lower yields of about 2t per hectare in wheat. This is also true for SA, which has seen a steady decline in wheat-area plantings in the recent past

This year could present more of the same, as Zimbabwe's wheat production prospects are quite dim again, with the harvest estimated at 20,000t, unchanged from 2017. This is a result of limited expansion in area planted combined with expectations of lower yields.

Aside from declining local production, Zimbabwe is consuming more wheaten products — over the past five years consumption has increased on average by 3% per year, to about 320,000t in 2018, driven largely by a growing bread demand. The US agriculture department [estimates](#) that Zimbabwean bakeries produce about 850,000 loaves a day.

With wheat production having slumped since 2002, the country relies on imports to meet domestic requirements. Wheat imports have amounted to an average of 305,000t a year over the past five years, of which SA supplied 34%. Second was Russia, with an average share of 17% over the past five years. The other notable wheat suppliers to Zimbabwe are Poland, Mozambique, Australia, Lithuania and Ukraine. This year, Zimbabwe's wheat imports could increase 7% to 320,000t. The key suppliers are likely to be similar to the aforementioned countries.

The dismal performance in production is limited to Zimbabwe for now. Other regional wheat-producing countries such as SA and Zambia could recover from 2017 levels. On August 28, SA's crop estimate committee forecast 2018 wheat production at 1.8m tons, which is 18% higher than the previous season due to expansion in area planted and expected higher yields. This follows good rainfall in the Western Cape in the past couple of weeks. Moreover, Zambia's 2018 wheat production could reach 200,000t, up by 3% from 2017, according to US agriculture department data. That said, Zambia and SA will remain net importers of wheat due to growing consumption.

While Zimbabwe might be the only country in Southern Africa that has seen a drastic decline in wheat production as an unintended consequence of policy decisions, the entire region needs to take measures to lift wheat production. Countries should start by investing in breeding higher yielding seed cultivars, instead of the production loan schemes as seen in Zimbabwe.