

Youth needed to take agriculture into new era of cross-industry integration

By [Nico Groenewald](#)

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"Opportunities for changing the game will rival that of the information technology sector." - Nico Groenewald, Head of Agribusiness at Standard Bank.



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Although not necessarily as obvious, the pervasive influence of agriculture on society is creating an entirely new and glamorous view of the sector that will attract the pioneering energies of young people looking for careers as enticing as those in information technology.

The ways in which technology and social media have changed consumer expectations and the nature of the products and services they aspire to have, triggered a ripple effect in agriculture.

Wherever you touch the world...

For instance, the convenience that social media delivers is now being copied in the energy sector, where petrol stations carry fresher produce than many supermarkets. In order to match that freshness, supermarkets are re-examining their logistics and cold chains. The traditional way of bringing produce from outlying districts to a central distribution centre and then sending it all the way out again, often to where it was harvested, for sale in supermarkets, is proving not only costly but detrimental to shelf quality.

Satellite technology is now being installed in tractors and other farm equipment in order for farmers to more accurately measure and monitor soil quality and, therefore, crop yields.

Green and renewable energy are being applied to farming operations not only to reduce energy costs but in response to society's demands for sustainable production in all sectors. However, the green and renewable industries are still evolving, leaving plenty of pioneering work to be done.

The debates raging on social media about the merits, or otherwise, of genetic modification of seeds and organic farming methodologies are not only making consumers more particular about what they buy but how it is labelled. This calls for much more astute production and packaging.

Food sovereignty issues in both the political and social domain are making local research into indigenous and heritage crops essential to the sustainability of local producers.

Thinking holistically

These and other issues are bringing agriculture out of its perceived sector isolation and meshing it tightly and very directly with consumer lifestyle requirements well beyond what gets cooked for dinner tonight. And they are moving agriculture's economic contribution to GDP, for instance, far beyond the relatively narrow criteria of employment in and foreign exchange generated by the industry.

Agriculture now has the potential to boost employment across multiple sectors, many of them unexpected. As just one example, growth in the logistics sector can be predicated on the ability to move fresh produce more efficiently. Also, if fresh thinking can be brought to bear on turning South Africa into a net exporter rather than a net importer of processed agricultural products, entirely new industries can be created - bringing with them an influx of foreign capital.

Innovators in the technology and research sectors can create more effective ways for South African conditions to be put to work to increase volume and quality of outputs. In other words, modern agriculture places almost no limits on people who wish to make an impact on the way the world works. Agriculture is no longer about planting crops or running herds of cattle. It's about satisfying and successful careers in all sorts of human activity linked to agriculture.

A new generation

This tipping point in the sector comes at a time when established farmers and agribusiness operators are beginning to age out of the market. Our own internal research matches those of external agencies in showing that the majority of commercial farmers in South Africa are in their fifties. Only some 8% are younger than 35. To some extent, the flow of new entrants to the sector is being diminished by uncertainties regarding sector policies. We understand that legislators are aware that decisions on policies need to be accelerated and must have economic benefits for all stakeholders.

Another entry barrier, the severe drought that has plagued parts of the country for some years, is temporary. It's just a matter of time before the weather changes. Still, the drought - and the weather in general - is another uncertainty. Our established producers have been on the land long enough to know that farming is a long-term activity that calls for financial and emotional endurance. We need our experienced farmers to focus on what they have always done best, which is getting mother nature to deliver her bounty.

However, although many of them are innovating, becoming tech savvy, and getting involved both up and downstream of their own operations, we must close the gap that is growing between those who have been on the land for generations and those coming out of school now.

Fortunately, Gen Y, now between the ages of 18 and 24, has been raised on technology innovation and has an appetite for new ideas in general. These young people understand and relish interconnectedness. They are socially minded. They want to make a difference. Best of all, they don't all necessarily want to be information technology whizzes. As long as they're doing something special that benefits the world in general, they will be happy in careers in logistics, retailing, green energy, research, and whatever business disciplines that have yet been invented that will impact agriculture.

All we need to do is show them that agriculture is about planting the seeds of the future - in whatever form feels good to you.

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