

For success, train families not farmers

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As the imperative for a just transition within the agricultural sector becomes more acute, so too will the need to improve the way we approach capacity development for emerging farmers.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

There is a tendency to underestimate how skilful farmers really are, but in today's economic and ecological climate, farming may well be more challenging than a career in law or medicine – so says new research from the Stellenbosch University's Centre for Complex Systems in Transition (CST).

According to this research, part of the reason previous efforts to foster new agricultural enterprises among emerging farmers have failed is that existing initiatives have underestimated how many diverse skills one needs to master in order to succeed as a farmer in this day and age.

The depth and breadth of competencies required to transition from subsistence to livelihood farming in the current market environment (dominated as it is by large retail chains and unsustainably large economies of scale) have proven insurmountable to all but a tiny fraction of farmers in South Africa.

Achieving financial profitability

Achieving basic financial profitability through increasingly severe climatic ups and downs requires skills that span small business management, financial planning, agronomy, chemistry and physics. In total, a far broader skill set than many higher-paying careers such as law or accounting is required.

Now, consider that achieving financial profitability in ways that are socially and ecologically just demands that, on top of these skills, farmers also possess a deep ethical commitment to both people and planet paired with tenacity, endurance and sensitivity.

Yet, despite its highly demanding nature, the prevailing image of agriculture is of something dull and antiquated. A career path 'of the elderly' or of 'white boers' to use the words of many of the youth surveyed in the research.

When providing reasons for the failure of many emerging farmers over the past 25 years, many point to the fact that agriculture is a career of last resort that fails to attract the best and brightest, or to the chronic shortcomings of the agricultural education and extension system in South Africa.

Nobody does it on their own

Institutional failings and stigmas notwithstanding, an important component of the agricultural capacity problem may lie in the fact that we still think about farming as an individual career path. We still think about 'the farmer', rather than of farming families, or farming communities.

New insights into the social relationships on successful farms indicate that when it comes to building successful and sustainable farms, nobody does it on their own. Given the diverse skillsets that a just transition in the agricultural sector requires, we need to let the notion of 'the farmer' die.

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In its place, we need to think about successful farming families and communities. This is not to say that there is not an individual driving the development of a small farming business, but rather that we do not lose sight of the fact that they do not do it alone. In almost every instance, farms that succeed build on a collection of skills within the household and community.

It then follows that as we aim to build capacity for a just agricultural future, we aim to develop farming skills and competencies at the family or community level rather than within the individuals. At a bare minimum, we need to be thinking about training couples up within the context of a nuclear family –developing complementary but differentiated capacities that enable a generative specialisation within farming families. This may mean differentiating business management and marketing skills from skills pertaining to soil management and plant health, for example.

Building collective competencies in this way has implications for everything from how curriculums are designed to the way that students are enrolled and where training is conducted.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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