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Stock theft and water shortages threaten Mhlambanyatsi farmers' livelihoods.



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Editor's Note



WINTER STRESS TEST FOR ESWATINI AGRICULTURE

As FMD containment enters its final stretch, farmers face tighter grazing, water stress and renewed pressure to protect livestock markets.

As winter settles over Eswatini, agriculture enters a season defined by constraint and calculation. Rainfall has receded, grazing has tightened, and water resources are under increasing strain. It is also, crucially, the decisive stretch in the country's fight against Foot and Mouth Disease, a campaign the Ministry of Agriculture hopes to conclude by July.

This convergence of climatic austerity and animal health enforcement gives May's edition of *Agribusiness Monthly* its central theme: finishing the FMD fight, not in abstraction, but in the cold, practical realities of winter production systems.

The national vaccination drive, now surpassing 300 000 cattle, has begun to unlock controlled movement in parts of the livestock economy, particularly feedlots. Yet the battle is not yet complete. Compliance remains uneven, enforcement remains critical, and the margin between containment and resurgence is still narrow. In this sense, winter does not only expose animals to nutritional stress, it exposes the integrity of the entire biosecurity architecture.

For the beef industry, the stakes are unusually high. Feedlots, long constrained by movement restrictions and disrupted supply, now sit at the centre of a carefully managed reopening. Their recovery is contingent on discipline, traceability and sustained vaccination coverage. Until export markets reopen, domestic efficiency is the only buffer against structural losses.

The Prime Minister's renewed call for stricter FMD compliance reflects this reality. Disease control has moved beyond veterinary administration into the realm of economic statecraft, where biosecurity determines market access and, by extension, national competitiveness.

Yet the agricultural story this month extends beyond livestock health. Winter is also exposing the sector's hydrological fragility. In several farming areas, water shortages are tightening production margins, particularly for livestock keepers already grappling with feed scarcity. Stock theft, reported in parts of Mhlambanyatsi, adds another layer of pressure, eroding both asset security and farmer confidence.

On the crop side, the 26 percent yield losses among Hamba Ubuye farmers offer a sobering reminder of how climate variability is now structurally embedded in production risk. Heat stress and erratic rainfall are no longer seasonal anomalies, they are recurring economic variables.

And yet, beneath these constraints, adaptation continues to surface in uneven but instructive ways. Feedlot operators are adjusting stocking strategies to align with controlled movement regimes. Smallholder farmers are experimenting, often cautiously, with diversified production systems. Institutions such as UNESWA are advancing agro-ecological models that attempt to reconcile productivity with ecological resilience.

Policy reform is also quietly

reshaping the sector's long-term trajectory. The introduction of a national meat grading system signals a shift toward formalised price discovery and export readiness, an essential step if Eswatini is to re-enter higher value beef markets with credibility and consistency.

Taken together, these developments suggest an agricultural economy in a state of disciplined transition. Not yet stable, but increasingly structured. Not yet resilient, but increasingly self-aware of its vulnerabilities.

This issue of *Agribusiness Monthly* captures that duality. From FMD containment efforts and feedlot recalibration, to climate shocks and market reforms, it reflects a sector attempting to consolidate gains while still under pressure from multiple fronts.

Winter, in this context, is not merely a season. It is a stress test. And the outcome of Eswatini's agricultural year may well depend on how successfully it finishes the FMD fight within it.

Phesheya Kunene
Editor, *Agribusiness Media*



Indigenous free range chickens feeding on feed at Butternice farm.

RESTORING INDIGENOUS FOOD ACCESS THROUGH BUTTER NICE FARM

BY SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST

At Butter Nice Farm in Mkhondvo, entrepreneur Nozizwe Ginindza is turning a personal struggle to access indigenous food into a growing agribusiness, supplying naturally produced Makhaya chicken and other traditional products to meet rising consumer demand in Eswatini.

Agrowing demand for indigenous food is creating new agribusiness opportunities in Eswatini, as farmers move to supply consumers seeking natural, traditional and locally produced products.

At Butter Nice Farm in Mkhondvo, entrepreneur Nozizwe Ginindza is building a business around that demand, focusing on restoring access to indigenous

food while supplying high-quality, naturally produced products to the market.

Ginindza, who studied Communication and Media Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, says her journey into farming was shaped by both personal experience and a clear gap in the market.

For her, Makhaya chicken represents more than just food. It is

tied to culture, memory and tradition. Growing up, it was a special meal she shared with her mother, but accessing it was often difficult.

“It was hard for my mother to find Makhaya chicken to pack for me when I was going to university,” she said.

That experience later informed her decision to venture into farming. After relocating to Mkhondvo, she and her family began producing their



Nozizwe Ginindza, founder of Butternice Farm.

own food, starting with Makhaya chicken. What began as a household solution soon revealed a broader opportunity as she realised that many consumers were facing the same challenge of limited access to indigenous products.

This led to the establishment of Butter Nice Farm, a business built not only on production, but on reconnecting consumers with traditional food while offering natural, high-quality alternatives to commercially produced products.

The brand itself reflects its origins. Ginindza said the name “Butter Nice Farm” was inspired by the farm’s early focus on butternut production, where customers frequently described the quality of the produce as “butter nice.”

“We started with butternut, and people would say the produce is ‘butter nice’ because of the quality, and that is how the name came about,” she said.

Today, the farm has expanded into a diversified enterprise producing between 500 and 800 Makhaya chickens, alongside chicken portions, whole chickens, live chickens for business purposes, goat meat under the Mkhondvo Goat Meat brand, and fresh produce such as sweet potatoes.

Her products are already reaching key urban markets, including Matsapha, Manzini and Mbabane, where demand for indigenous and naturally produced food continues

to grow. However, Ginindza said demand is still outpacing supply, with additional interest coming from Mozambique, although the business is not yet in a position to export legally.

One of the main constraints is production capacity. Makhaya chickens take longer to mature compared to commercial broilers, limiting how quickly supply can be increased. She also noted that consumer awareness remains a challenge, as many people do not fully understand the value of indigenous chicken in terms of production methods, taste and nutritional benefits.

“People still need to understand the value of Makhaya chicken and how it is different from commercially raised chicken,” she said.

Her production model focuses on simplicity and natural methods, which she believes are essential for maintaining both quality and authenticity. At the same time, she recognises that building a sustainable agribusiness requires more than just production.

Ginindza encourages aspiring farmers to approach agriculture with a clear purpose and a strong understanding of the market they want to serve.

“Farmers should focus on producing what people need, not just what is easy to grow,” she said.

She emphasised the importance of consistency, collaboration with other farmers and maintaining quality, noting that farming is also about building trust with customers.

Her efforts have already been recognised. In 2023, she received the Best Woman-Owned Business award at the Entrepreneurship of the Year Awards in Shiselweni, highlighting both her business growth and her contribution to the sector.

Ginindza’s journey reflects a broader shift in Eswatini’s agribusiness landscape, where opportunities are increasingly driven by changing consumer preferences and demand for locally produced,

natural and culturally relevant food.

At Butter Nice Farm, that shift is already visible. What began as a personal solution to a supply challenge has grown into a business that is meeting market demand while restoring access to indigenous food.

Looking ahead, Ginindza plans to expand production, strengthen partnerships with local farmers and position the business for future export opportunities.

Her story shows that agribusiness can go beyond production to include culture, identity and market responsiveness — turning traditional food into a modern economic opportunity.





HAMBA UBUYE MAIZE FARMERS FACE 26% YIELD LOSS AS HEATWAVE HITS PRODUCTION

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

Eswatini's smallholder maize farmers under the Hamba Ubuye Commercial Maize Project are facing a projected 26% national yield loss, as prolonged dry spells and heatwaves continue to cut into production despite strong farmer

participation and sustained input support. The assessment was presented during a field visit led by Eswatini Water and Agricultural Development Enterprise (EWADE) Chief Executive Officer Samson Sithole and the executive team to farmer clusters in Sigangeni, Sicunusa,

and Gege, where management monitored crop performance and engaged farmers on production challenges, extension support, and loan repayment. The Commercial Maize Project currently supports 191 farmers nationwide, covering 1,827 hectares, of which 1,701 hectares

have already been planted. Total investment under the programme stands at E13.9 million, making it one of the country's biggest coordinated smallholder maize support initiatives.

Regional figures show uneven participation and funding patterns. Shiselweni has the highest number of beneficiaries, with 74 farmers cultivating 688.5 hectares under support worth E4.90 million. Manzini follows with 66 farmers farming 675.2 hectares, backed by E5.79 million. Hhohho has 38 farmers covering 270.2 hectares with E2.54 million disbursed, while Lubombo has 13 farmers covering 67.5 hectares.

EWADE said the 2025/26 season has been heavily affected by climatic stress, with the Hhohho region, particularly Ntfontjeni, recording the highest projected yield loss at 35%. The figures once again expose the vulnerability of rain-fed maize production in Eswatini, where erratic rainfall and rising temperatures continue to undermine productivity and threaten food security.

Despite the harsh conditions, participation among farmers has remained strong. EWADE said turnout in the visited clusters was encouraging, reflecting the determination of beneficiaries to continue planting even under difficult weather conditions.

At the centre of the initiative is the Hamba Ubuye Revolving Fund, a financing model through which farmers receive production support upfront and repay after harvest, allowing the same pool of money to be recycled to support the next planting season and reach more farmers over time. In practical terms, the fund is meant to reduce barriers to inputs while building a self-sustaining support system for smallholder producers.

That model has so far shown relatively strong repayment performance. As of February 2026, 78% of allocated loans had been recovered, translating to E10.9 million repaid out of the E14 million



disbursed. Nearly 60% of farmers have fully settled their loans, while 8.7% have not yet started repayment.

Sithole said the repayment trends point to both discipline and confidence in the programme.

"Our farmers remain at the heart of national food security. Despite the challenges, their determination continues to inspire us. We will continue to walk this journey with them to ensure no farmer is left behind," he said.

During the field visit, EWADE teams also focused on extension support, working with farmers on fall armyworm control, pest and disease management, fertiliser application, top-dressing, and crop diversification through bean planting in partnership with the National Disaster Management Agency.

From a broader policy perspective, the Commercial

Maize Project reflects an attempt to move smallholder farmers beyond subsistence and into more structured semi-commercial production, backed by financing and technical support. However, the projected losses also reveal the limits of input-led models when climate-resilient infrastructure, particularly irrigation, is not in place.

The Hamba Ubuye approach has demonstrated promise, especially through its strong loan recovery rate and continued farmer participation. But repeated exposure to climate shocks remains a serious structural threat, not only to yields and farmer incomes, but also to the long-term sustainability of the revolving fund itself.

EWADE says it will continue strengthening extension services and adaptive support measures to help farmers stabilise yields. With

climate pressure intensifying, the organisation maintains that protecting productivity will be critical to safeguarding both rural livelihoods and national food security.



EHIS FARMER WORKSHOPS START AS MANDATORY REGISTRATION BEGINS ON 1 MAY

BY NOSIPHO MKHIZE | JOURNALIST

The National Agricultural Marketing Board (NAMBoard) has launched a nationwide series of Eswatini Horticulture Information System (EHIS) farmer workshops ahead of the start of mandatory registration on 1 May 2026, as the regulatory organisation prepares growers for compliance and wider use of the digital platform.

The workshops are targeting commercial horticulture farmers and are intended to raise awareness on how the system works, why registration matters, and how farmers can complete the process.

NAMBoard has positioned the outreach as a practical education drive rather than simply a compliance exercise, with farmers expected to receive direct guidance on registration and the role the platform will play in organising the sector.

According to the workshop schedule, the Hhohho session will be held at Gesawu on 22 April 2026, followed by the Shiselweni workshop at Nhlanguano REO on 29 April 2026, while the Manzini workshop will take place at Mavuso Trade Centre on 7 May 2026. All sessions will

begin at 8:30 am.

The workshops come as NAMBoard prepares for the rollout of compulsory registration on EHIS from 1 May 2026, a move expected to tighten coordination in the horticulture industry and improve access to reliable production data.

Sydney Dladla, NAMBoard Head of Agri-Business, said the roadshow had been organised mainly to raise awareness and ensure farmers fully understand the system before the compliance date takes effect.

“The purpose of these farmer workshops is to raise awareness and help farmers understand what EHIS is, how it works, and why it is important to their farming business,” said Dladla.

He said EHIS was designed to improve transparency and strengthen coordination in the horticulture sector by capturing credible farmer and production data that can be used for planning, marketing, and broader industry decision-making.

The workshops are expected to cover what EHIS is, how it works, the benefits of registration, and how the platform

can support market access and production planning. Farmers will also be taken through the registration process step by step.

For growers, NAMBoard is presenting EHIS not only as an administrative requirement, but as a business tool that can improve visibility of produce, support structured market access and assist with production planning.

Dladla said interest in the platform was already growing, with 3,648 farmers currently registered on EHIS. He said the workshops were meant to build on that progress by giving farmers a chance to engage directly, ask questions, and receive practical support.

“We already have 3,648 farmers registered on EHIS, and these workshops are meant to deepen that progress by giving growers the opportunity to ask questions and get practical guidance on registration,” he said.

The workshops also come at a

time when digital systems are playing an increasingly important role in agricultural compliance, planning, and market organisation, with regulators and industry players placing greater emphasis on traceability and structured data.

Notably, Lubombo is not included in the workshop schedule. Dladla said the decision was based on logistics, with farmers from the region expected to attend the Manzini session at Mavuso Trade Centre.

“Lubombo farmers were not left out. The decision was made on the basis that they can easily transport to Manzini, where the workshop will be held at Mavuso Trade Centre,” he said.

The workshops are open to all commercial horticulture farmers and form part of NAMBoard’s broader push to improve sector readiness ahead of mandatory registration. Through the sessions, farmers are expected to gain a clearer understanding of the information required during registration, including personal

details, farm location, crop profiles, expected production volumes, and market preferences.

With the 1 May 2026 compliance date now confirmed, NAMBoard is urging farmers to use the remaining time to attend the workshops, familiarise themselves with the system, and prepare for registration.

The board says the move is aimed at supporting a more coordinated, transparent, and market-oriented horticulture sector, with EHIS expected to become a key tool in shaping future production and marketing decisions in Eswatini.

The board says the move is aimed at supporting a more coordinated, transparent, and market-oriented horticulture sector, with EHIS expected to become a key tool in shaping future production and marketing decisions in Eswatini.



NAMBOARD officers in one of NAMBOARD roadshows, welcoming farmers to register Eswatini Horticulture Information System (EHIS.)



AS FEEDLOT COLLAPSES, SITHOLE EXPANDS IN MANZINI

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE – EDITOR

“At a time when Eswatini’s feedlot industry is under severe strain from FMD, rising feed costs and collapsing operations, Manzini farmer Phetsile Sithole is taking a different path, growing Maphetsi Feedlot through disciplined sales, reinvestment and a clear business strategy.”

While Eswatini’s feedlot sector is reeling from closure, high costs and Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD), one farmer in Manzini is moving in the opposite direction. Phetsile Sithole has recently sold more than 20 cattle and is expanding her operation at a time when only 212 out of the country’s 619 registered feedlots are still operating.

Her growth comes as the industry faces one of its toughest periods in years. The government has already admitted the sector was in trouble even before the FMD outbreak, with farmers squeezed by expensive feed,

limited access to finance, a shortage of quality stock and long-standing complaints over losses from by-products that bring them no return.

But Sithole says her recent sales were not driven by fear or pressure. They were a business decision.

“I am not selling because of pressure. I sell when the numbers make sense,” she said. “The focus is on producing quality cattle, hitting the right weight and supplying the market at the right time.”

Her remarks place her among a small group of operators still showing signs of growth in a sector now widely described as distressed. At the National Feedlot Indaba 2026, Agriculture Minister Mandla Tshawuka said the

decline had started before FMD, with the disease becoming the latest and heaviest blow to the industry.

For farmers, the pressure is coming from all sides. FMD has disrupted livestock movement and delayed sales. Feed prices remain high. Banks have become more cautious about lending to the sector. And farmers continue to complain that hides, offal, horns and hooves are taken without compensation, cutting deeper into already thin margins.

Sithole said many farmers are making matters worse by selling out of panic.

“The biggest mistake right now is panic selling. You lose value and weaken your business. Feedlot



Phetsile Sithole inspecting their beef together with her son at the Abattoir.

farming allows you to plan and stay in control,” she said.

Her own path into the industry was built over time. Holding a Bachelor of Commerce in Marketing, Sithole previously worked as an Accounts Clerk at the University of Eswatini before shifting fully into agribusiness through family farming interests in vegetables and dairy.

She later moved into the meat business through a butchery in Manzini, but quickly discovered that having customers was not enough without proper systems.

“I learned the hard way. We had business, we had clients, but I did not have systems. That cost me,” she said.

After closing two butcheries due to operational and structural problems, she reworked her model and turned to feedlot farming with support from extension officers under the Ministry of Agriculture.

Today, Maphetsi Feedlot operates as a structured finishing unit supplying formal markets, including Eswatini Meat Industries and local butcheries. Her recent sale of more than 20 cattle reflects a reinvestment strategy, not a forced exit.

Still, Sithole says survival in the feedlot business is becoming harder.

“Feed is expensive, and the market is not always fair. In many cases, buyers dictate prices, and farmers carry the risk,” she said.

She also echoed a complaint that has become common in the industry: that farmers are often paid only for carcass weight, while other parts of the animal continue to generate value elsewhere in the chain.

“Some buyers only pay for the carcass weight, yet the hide, offal and other by-products have value. Farmers are losing income there,” she said.

That concern mirrors one of the biggest issues raised at the Feedlot Indaba, where the unresolved “5th quarter” was singled out as one of the factors weakening incentives for farmers to invest in feedlotting.

Sithole has also had to fight for her place in a male-dominated industry.

“When I started, I was the only woman in spaces dominated by men. It was difficult, and at times I doubted myself,” she said.

But she said consistency, technical knowledge and confidence helped her establish herself.

“Business does not recognise gender. You have to stand your ground and know what you are doing,” she said.

As government, development partners and farmers search for ways to rescue a sector in decline, Sithole’s story stands out as both an exception and a lesson. It shows that while the feedlot industry is under severe pressure, disciplined commercial farmers can still find room to grow.

But it also underlines a bigger truth: unless Eswatini fixes disease control, financing, feed costs and value-sharing across the beef chain, more feedlots could still fall out of operation.

“This is not just farming, it is business. You must plan, invest and think long term,” Sithole said.



UNESWA POSITIONS AFRICAN GINGER AS HIGH-VALUE CROP FOR FARMERS

BY SIBUSISISWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST

With traders already importing African ginger from Mozambique to meet demand, researchers at the University of Eswatini's Luyengo Campus are positioning the crop as a high-value enterprise that could open a new income stream for local farmers while supporting conservation of an endangered indigenous species.

Locally known as sidvungule, African ginger (*Siphonochilus aethiopicus*) is increasingly being presented not only as a medicinal plant under threat, but also as a commercially promising crop that fits well into agroecological farming systems.

The work is being driven through the Eswatini Institute for Research in Traditional Medicine, Medicinal and Indigenous Food Plants (EIRMIP) under an ongoing project titled The distribution and conservation of African ginger (*Siphonochilus aethiopicus*) in Eswatini – an endangered medicinal plant.

The initiative is supported by the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund in partnership with the Global Environment Facility.

What makes the project especially significant is that it goes beyond conservation. It is also creating livelihood opportunities for communities that use and trade the plant.

Through training on sustainable

propagation, restoration and crop establishment, traditional healers, muthi traders and farmers are being encouraged to cultivate African ginger instead of harvesting it from the wild.

That approach seeks to solve two problems at once: protecting a declining indigenous species while creating space for commercialisation, value addition and income generation.

The message came through strongly during the launch of the Agroecology Demonstration Site at UNESWA Luyengo Campus, where researchers showcased sustainable farming innovations aimed at improving farmer livelihoods and promoting environmentally responsible production systems.

Prototype products already developed under the project include African ginger-infused honey and African ginger marmalade, offering an early glimpse into the crop's value-added potential beyond the sale of raw planting material or tubers.

“The plant is becoming scarce because the people are harvesting it from the forest without replanting. This project is about preserving it and teaching people how to grow it sustainably.” Patricia Carmichael.

Traditionally, African ginger has been collected from forest areas, where it thrives naturally under tree cover. But continuous extraction without replenishment has contributed to its decline, raising concerns among researchers and conservationists.

Carmichael said the project is now working with traditional healers, farmers and plant enthusiasts to move the crop away from forest collection and into managed cultivation systems on farms.

A recent workshop held at the campus brought together traditional healers and farmers to focus on propagation, crop establishment, conservation and the sustainable use of African ginger. The broader aim is to shift community practices from extraction to production.

“We are discouraging people from going into the forest to dig out the plant because it leads to depletion. Instead, we are encouraging them to grow it.” Patricia Carmichael.

The commercial case for African ginger is strengthened by regional trends. Across southern Africa, studies have shown that many indigenous medicinal plants sold in South African markets are still harvested from wild populations in neighbouring countries, including Eswatini and Mozambique, with very little formal cultivation taking place.

That pattern has contributed to shrinking supplies of high-value medicinal plants and rising concern

among traders and conservation agencies. It also creates a clear market signal: demand already exists, but supply remains constrained.

For Eswatini farmers, that opens a potentially important opportunity. Increased local cultivation could help replace dwindling wild supply while tapping into an already established cross-border value chain.

African ginger is also being promoted as a crop that fits well within low-input agroecological systems, making it especially relevant for smallholder farmers. It performs best under shade, similar to its natural forest habitat, and grows well in well-drained sandy soils. It can also be produced organically using compost and manure, reducing dependence on expensive synthetic inputs.

African ginger thrives under shade, grows well in sandy soils and can be produced using compost and manure, making it well suited to low-input farming systems.

“It does not require expensive inputs. Farmers can use compost and natural methods, which reduces production costs,” Carmichael said.

The crop is planted during the summer rainfall season and takes about seven to nine months to mature. Harvesting is done in winter, once the leaves have dried, signalling that the underground tuber is ready.

Beyond its conservation importance, African ginger is being positioned as a crop with genuine market potential. It is already widely used in the traditional medicine value chain, with demand driven by muthi traders and herbal markets, yet local supply remains limited.

“Studies show that the plant is scarce in Eswatini, which is why traders are importing it from Mozambique. That shows there is a market opportunity for local farmers,” Carmichael said.

The opportunity lies in replacing imports with local production, allowing farmers to participate directly in the medicinal plant economy through tuber production, seedling multiplication and value-added herbal products.

African ginger also offers a broader income base because of its multiple uses. In traditional medicine, it is used for ailments such as asthma, fever, headaches and immune support, while its leaves can also be processed into herbal tea for flu relief. This expands its commercial appeal and gives farmers access to multiple market segments rather than a single end use.

Carmichael said both the tuber and the leaves contribute to the plant's economic value, making it a versatile crop for enterprise development.

Farmers interested are encouraged to engage directly with UNESWA Luyengo Campus for technical support and production guidance. Through the EIRMIP project, farmers can access information on crop establishment and management, available market opportunities, planting material such as seedlings, and training on sustainable production practices.

She added that ongoing research is also focusing on genotype evaluation, comparing local African ginger varieties with those found in other countries in an effort to improve production potential and identify stronger planting material.

By promoting cultivation instead of forest extraction, the project is supporting biodiversity conservation while also opening the door to enterprise diversification and rural income generation. For farmers looking to diversify into high-value, low-input crops with an established market, African ginger is beginning to stand out as one of the more promising opportunities taking root in Eswatini.

E740 MILLION CASSAVA DRIVE TARGETS EXPORTS, SMALLHOLDER FARMERS

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

Eswatini has launched a US\$40 million (about E740 million) cassava commercialisation project aimed at bringing smallholder farmers into export-oriented value chains, as the country intensifies efforts to diversify beyond sugar and build a more resilient agricultural economy.

The initiative, led by the Eswatini Cassava Agri-industrial Centre in partnership with TRIOMF Eswatini, was presented to farmers and stakeholders on Tuesday as a strategic intervention to position cassava as a high-potential crop for food security, agro-processing and export growth.

The project comes at a time when the global cassava market exceeds 330 million tonnes annually, with Africa producing more than 60 percent of total output but capturing only a limited share of high-value export markets. That gap, largely driven by weak processing capacity and fragmented value chains, is what the Eswatini initiative aims to close.

Co-founder Isaac Knafo said the project is built around an agro-industrial hub model designed to connect farmers not only to production, but also to processing infrastructure and international buyers. He said cassava presents a faster, more climate-resilient return profile than many traditional crops.

“We are building a system where farmers do not just produce, but participate in processing and market access,” said Knafo, adding that the project already has a functioning starch and flour processing facility in Siphofaneni.

The first phase of the project will cover 800 hectares over two years, with plans for nationwide expansion as more chiefdoms are incorporated. Participating farmers are expected to receive inputs, technical support and access to financing, with aggregation



Dr Isaac Knafo co-founder of Eswatini Cassava Agri-industrial Center (ECAIC).

playing a central role in meeting export-scale demand.

From a regional trade perspective, cassava remains underdeveloped in Southern Africa despite growing demand. South Africa, for instance, exported more than US\$10 million worth of cassava in 2022 to markets in Europe and the Middle East, while also importing cassava from neighbouring countries. Analysts say this points to a clear opportunity for Eswatini to position itself as a competitive supplier within SADC and beyond.

TRIOMF Eswatini representative Kenneth Dlamini said commercial success would depend heavily on strong agronomic practices, especially soil testing and proper fertiliser management.

“Yield is not accidental. Farmers must treat cassava as a commercial crop,” he said.

International demand is expected to be a major driver of the project. Anish Sivada told farmers that India’s cassava industry requires reliable, large-scale supply for starch, flour and ethanol production. Although Africa currently exports about 2.6 million tonnes of cassava products annually, most of the continent’s production is still consumed domestically, limiting its export earnings potential.

For Eswatini, the shift carries broader economic significance. Agriculture remains central to rural livelihoods, but the export base is still heavily concentrated in sugarcane. Cassava offers an alternative crop that is drought tolerant, adaptable

to marginal soils and capable of supplying downstream industries such as food processing, animal feed and bio-ethanol.

Farmers who attended the workshop welcomed the initiative, but said practical implementation would be key.

Mandla Msibi of Mahlanya said access to finance would determine whether smallholders can participate meaningfully. He said the project appeared inclusive, but required clear and workable loan structures to enable expansion at farm level.

Zanele Shiba of Luyengo said market uncertainty had historically discouraged farmers from investing in new crops, but the proposed offtake arrangements could shift that outlook.

“If markets are secured, farmers can produce with confidence,” she said.

Mlamuli Nkambule, who already grows cassava for local markets, said he is now looking to expand into

commercial production. He identified export demand, particularly from India, as a major incentive for scaling up.

“The opportunity is in volume and consistency,” he said.

Other participants shared similar views. A youth agripreneur from Malkerns said value addition would determine whether farmers capture meaningful returns, while a women’s cooperative leader from Shiselweni said group-based production models could improve access to finance and inputs while helping farmers meet supply requirements. An agribusiness stakeholder from Manzini said linking growers directly to processing and export channels had the potential to fundamentally change the economics of farming.

The project also aligns with Eswatini’s broader policy direction. With sugar continuing to dominate agricultural exports, the economy remains vulnerable to market

concentration and price shocks. Cassava, by contrast, offers multiple income streams across food, industrial and energy markets, making it both a food security crop and a commercial commodity.

The major test now lies in execution.

While funding, land and market interest appear to be in place, the long-term success of the project will depend on farmer uptake, production discipline and the full operationalisation of processing capacity.

Knafo said implementation would begin once funding paperwork is finalised, urging farmers to register and mobilise others. The ambition is significant. Whether cassava becomes a new export pillar for Eswatini, however, will depend on delivery.



Some cassava plants irrigated using drip irrigation system. (INSERT): Harvested cassava, fresh from the field.

ESWASA PUSHES HIDES STANDARDS, TANNERY PLAN AFTER E1M FMD LOSS

BY: PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

The Eswatini Standards Authority (ESWASA) has intensified efforts to formalise hides and carcass standards as the country moves to curb losses, unlock value from livestock by-products, and accelerate plans to establish a local tannery, following an estimated E1 million loss linked to the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis.

The intervention comes as more than 15,000 hides were lost over the past 11 months, with over 4,000 hides reportedly stockpiled in Hhelehhele for more than six months due to export disruptions.

Director of Ngwane Enterprise, Jonathan van Staden, said the crisis exposed structural weaknesses in the hides value chain.

“We lost over 15,000 hides, translating to about E1 million in losses. Borders were closed, and exports halted, and that immediately affected prices and operations,” he said.

“We collect hides across Eswatini and export to South Africa, including Polokwane, but the FMD restrictions disrupted the entire chain.”

He noted that the average price per hide has dropped to about E80, reflecting depressed demand and quality concerns.

“Animal husbandry remains the biggest challenge. If we improve quality at the farm level, we can compete regionally and access better markets,” he added. Standards to address quality and market gaps

ESWASA convened a Technical Committee (TC 31) meeting on meat, carcass, and hides standards with stakeholders including government,



ESWASA Standards Development Officer, Milagrosa Mondlane.

abattoirs, farmers, processors, and exporters, with technical support from the International Trade Centre (ITC).

ESWASA Standards Development Officer Milagrosa Mondlane said the absence of harmonised national standards has resulted in inconsistent pricing and weak competitiveness.

“The sector operates without a uniform and enforceable framework for assessing meat and carcass quality. This leads to inefficiencies across the value chain,” she said.

The proposed standards will introduce structured classification systems for carcasses and hides,

covering defects such as disease-related damage, branding, contamination, flaying errors, and poor curing practices. The framework is expected to improve transparency, pricing, and compliance with food safety requirements.

Wake-up call for farmers

Chairperson of the Eswatini Leather Cooperative, Robert Shabangu, said the reforms should shift farmers’ focus beyond meat production.

“Farmers must realise that value is not only in the meat. The hide is a critical asset that can drive the leather industry,” he said.

“If we improve livestock care and handling, we can supply high-quality hides for leather production, create jobs, and expand exports.”

He added that improved standards would strengthen the value chain.

“This will improve the value chain in Eswatini. High-quality hides will allow local processors to produce competitive leather products and access international markets,” he said.

Chief Executive Officer of the Eswatini National Agricultural Union, Tammy Dlamini, said farmers support the initiative but expect implementation.

“As farmers, we support efforts that bring transparency and fair pricing. This must be implemented in a way that delivers real value to farmers,” he said.

“When pricing is linked to quality, farmers will improve production practices. That is how we build a competitive livestock sector.”

Livestock and feedlot farmer Phetsile Sithole said improving hide value would change farmer behaviour.

“Farmers have long focused on meat because hides bring little return. If pricing improves and markets open, farmers will invest more in animal care and handling,” he said.

Tannery plan gains support

Stakeholders identified the establishment of a domestic tannery as critical to unlocking value. Currently, most hides are exported raw to South Africa for processing, limiting local earnings.

Van Staden said local processing would significantly increase returns.

“We are exporting raw materials and importing finished products. A tannery would allow us to process locally, create jobs and increase export value,” he said.

Industry players noted that a tannery would enable Eswatini to move up the value chain into leather manufacturing, producing goods such as footwear, upholstery, and accessories.

Regional trade and industry outlook

Southern Africa’s hides and skins sector is dominated by South Africa, which slaughters over two million

cattle annually and exports processed hides to markets including China, Italy, and Turkey. Export volumes to Asia reached about 17,000 tonnes in 2024, highlighting the scale of the regional industry.

In contrast, Mozambique and Eswatini largely export raw hides with limited processing, often at a lower value due to quality constraints and weak grading systems.

Eswatini’s livestock sector remains central to rural livelihoods and contributes significantly to agricultural output. However, limited value addition means much of the economic benefit is lost, as finished leather products are imported while raw hides are exported.

Why standards matter

Experts say improving hide quality through better animal husbandry, disease control, and proper curing methods, such as salting or sun-drying, can significantly increase value. High-grade hides fetch premium prices and are essential for industrial leather production.

The introduction of national standards, combined with investment in a tannery, is expected to:

Improve farmer incomes through quality-based pricing

Reduce waste and post-slaughter losses

Strengthen export competitiveness



Some materials made from animal skin. (INSERT): Leather shoes and leather belt.

Create jobs in leather processing and manufacturing

Build resilience against shocks such as FMD

Institutional role and next steps

ESWASA, established under the Quality and Standards Act of 2003, is mandated to develop and enforce national standards, ensure product quality, and support trade competitiveness through certification, testing, and industry capacity building.

The ITC is supporting the initiative by providing technical tools and expertise to help align local standards with international market requirements.

The draft standards will be subjected to a 60-day public consultation process before finalisation and gazetting.

Analysts say effective implementation, coupled with investment in processing infrastructure, could reposition Eswatini’s livestock sector from a raw commodity supplier to a competitive player in the regional leather industry.

For farmers, the shift is clear: improve livestock management, protect hide quality, and unlock value beyond meat.

236 000 CATTLE VACCINATED AS PM URGES STRICT COMPLIANCE AMID ESCALATING FMD CONTROLS

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR



Veterinary officers busy with vaccinating while the Prime Minister and the Minister watches on. (INSERT) Some of the cattle undergoing vaccination.

Prime Minister Russell Mmiso Dlamini has urged strict national compliance with Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) control measures as Eswatini surpasses 236 000 vaccinated cattle, representing over 40 percent of the national herd, amid an intensified containment campaign.

The Prime Minister made the remarks during an oversight visit to Mzimnene Dip Tank in Ngwane Park, where about 700 cattle received

their second dose under the ongoing nationwide vaccination programme. The site remains FMD-free, with authorities emphasising that vaccination is a preventive measure aimed at protecting the herd from infection.

Dlamini, dressed in full protective gear, was briefed by Minister of Agriculture Mandla Tshawuka and veterinary teams on field operations, including correct vaccine administration techniques. Veterinary expert Dr Pride Shongwe

demonstrated the importance of selecting precise injection points to ensure vaccine efficacy and animal safety.

Addressing farmers and officials, Dlamini said Government was intensifying efforts to contain the disease but warned that non-compliance, particularly illegal livestock movement, continues to undermine progress.

“Government is doing everything within its power to eradicate this

disease. However, if it persists, it will largely be due to our own actions. Reckless movement of livestock undermines the progress we are making,” he said.

He added that cattle remain a critical economic asset, warning that continued export restrictions have already resulted in job losses and reduced incomes within the beef value chain.

Eswatini’s beef exports to international markets, including the European Union, remain suspended following the outbreak, placing additional pressure on farmers and processors.

The Prime Minister further noted that the vaccination campaign had reached a critical milestone, with approximately 40 percent of cattle having received second doses. He expressed confidence that, with continued cooperation, the country could achieve full coverage in the coming months.

Meanwhile, Tshawuka confirmed that the country is working to restore its export status, stating that the vaccination programme is expected to conclude by the end of June, subject to adequate vaccine supply and compliance levels.

“We have made significant progress, but restoring exports and protecting livelihoods will depend on strict adherence to all control measures,” he said.

The Minister also raised concern over biosecurity breaches, revealing that approximately 70 metres of cordon fence had been stolen along the Lavumisa border. He warned that such incidents increase the risk of cross-border livestock movement and potential reinfection, particularly given ongoing outbreaks in neighbouring countries.

At Mzimnene Dip Tank, about 700 cattle received their second dose in a controlled, FMD-free environment,



Prime Minister Russell Dlamini being briefed by the Minister of Agriculture Mandla Tshawuka upon his arrival at Mzimnene diptank, Ngwane Park.

reinforcing the preventive nature of the programme.

From an industry perspective, the FMD outbreak has exposed structural weaknesses in livestock management, including gaps in compliance, traceability, and coordinated disease control. At the same time, it has underscored the economic importance of the sector, with cattle serving as both a store of wealth and a key driver of rural livelihoods.

Dlamini concluded by calling for a unified national response, urging farmers to utilise dip tanks, cooperate with veterinary officers, and adhere strictly to movement regulations.

“The success of this fight depends on all of us. Without full cooperation, the disease will continue to spread. But with discipline and collective action, we will overcome it,” he said.

212 OUT OF 619 FEEDLOTS STILL OPERATING AS ESWATINI MOVES TO SAVE A SECTOR IN DECLINE

BY SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST



Eswatini's feedlot industry is facing one of its most difficult moments in years, with only 212 of the country's 619 registered feedlots still operational.

The figure, revealed during the National Feedlot Indaba 2026 at The George Hotel in Manzini, paints a troubling picture of a sector once viewed as a key pillar of livestock value addition, meat quality improvement, export growth and rural income generation.

For many farmers, feedlotting was meant to offer a pathway from traditional livestock keeping into commercial beef production. It promised better finishing of cattle, stronger market linkages and improved returns. Today, however, the industry is battling a combination of pressures that have pushed hundreds of operators out of production.

While Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) has become the most visible crisis, the Indaba made it clear that the sector's decline started long before the latest outbreak. Rising

feed costs, limited access to finance, shortage of quality feeder stock and unresolved market fairness concerns have steadily weakened confidence in feedlot farming.

Minister of Agriculture Mandla Tshawuka said FMD has worsened an already fragile situation.

"Recently, the sector has been on a downward trajectory, even before the advent of FMD. FMD is the latest and heaviest blow dealt on the industry. There are 619 registered feedlots but only 212 are currently operational," he said.

His remarks set the tone for the discussions. The challenge before government, financiers, development partners and farmers is not only to control disease, but to rebuild an industry whose foundations have been under strain for years.

Farmers are currently facing movement restrictions linked to FMD, rising input prices and difficulty accessing animals for finishing. Banks have also become more cautious about lending to livestock producers because of the risks associated with disease

outbreaks. For operators who rely on steady animal movement and predictable market access, these disruptions have made feedlotting increasingly costly.

One of the long-standing frustrations raised at the Indaba was the issue of the "fifth quarter" — the commercial value of hides, offal, horns and hooves. Farmers argue that these parts of the animal are often taken without fair compensation, reducing their total earnings and weakening the business case for feedlot investment.

For livestock farmer Sydney Nkambule of Sigangeni in Luhlendlweni, the crisis is felt directly at farm level. He said when FMD is detected in an area, movement is stopped, leaving farmers unable to sell animals on time.

"Instead, we continue buying feed while waiting for restrictions to be lifted, and that becomes very costly for farmers," he said.

Development partners also acknowledged the urgency of the moment. European Union Political

Counsellor Jose Marta Becerra described the Indaba as taking place at a critical point for Eswatini's livestock sector.

"This gathering comes at a critical moment for Eswatini's livestock sector," he said.

He noted that feedlots remain central to the livestock value chain, but continue to face barriers such as high feed costs, limited feeder stock, poor access to finance and disease shocks. These challenges, he said, are hitting micro, small and medium enterprises the hardest.

"This Indaba is therefore not just a dialogue platform; it is a call to action to develop practical, coordinated and scalable solutions," he said.

A key recovery vehicle is the Eswatini Livestock Value Chain Development Programme, a four-year European Union-funded initiative running from 2023 to 2027. Implemented by the International Trade Centre in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture's Department of Veterinary and Livestock Services, the programme seeks to improve productivity, market access and competitiveness in the beef and goat value chains.

Several possible interventions were presented. Tshawuka said farmers can apply through the Ministry of Agriculture to access government land for feedlot-related production under the community farming strategy already being implemented in areas such as Sitsatsaweni, Manzamnyama and Lomahasha. This could help farmers produce fodder and reduce dependence on costly purchased feed.

However, the minister stressed that disease control remains central to recovery, describing FMD as "the elephant in the room."

Government has rolled out vaccinations, an integrated response



European Union Political Counsellor Jose Marta Becerra.

programme and new standard operating procedures. Eswatini received 70,000 vaccine doses in February 2026, followed by another 50,000 doses. Vaccination figures rose from more than 18,000 cattle in early March to about 110,000 by mid-March.

The state has also committed major funding, including an estimated E90 million for FMD control, E57 million for vaccines and E15 million for cordon fence rehabilitation in the 2026/27 agriculture budget.

"We will only conquer this through cooperation," Tshawuka said.

Support through the Eswatini Agricultural Development Fund was also discussed, with farmers encouraged to apply for loans offered at 9 percent interest. Other interventions include fodder production support, hay baling equipment worth more than E3.1 million, artificial insemination services and farmer training.

To date, the programme has delivered artificial insemination equipment worth E906,305.94, imported bovine semen worth E310,695, inseminated 329 beef cattle, vaccinated 4,291 beef cattle and 4,541 goats at pilot sites, and trained 510 farmers in feedlot production.

The message from Manzini was clear: Eswatini's feedlot sector is under pressure, but not beyond recovery. Its survival will depend on how quickly disease control, financing, land access, fodder production and market reforms are turned into practical relief for farmers.

STOCK THEFT, WATER CHALLENGES TAKE CENTRE STAGE AS MINISTRY ENGAGES MHLAMBANYATSI FARMERS

By Sibusisiwe Ndzimandze | Journalist



Farmers listening attentively on the event proceedings during the 'Taking the Ministry to the people' Initiative held at Mhlambanyatsi Training Centre.

Stock theft, water shortages and limited access to agricultural services took centre stage when the Ministry of Agriculture brought its "Taking the Ministry to the People" initiative to Mhlambanyatsi Inkhundla.

The engagement, aligned with government's Nkwe directive, is aimed at taking services closer to communities and ensuring that farmers receive direct support where they operate. It brought together key agricultural institutions, including EWADE, EADF, NAMBoard, NMC and the Eswatini Dairy Board, to engage farmers on production, financing, markets, livestock

development and technical services.

Minister of Agriculture Mandla Tshawuka said the Ministry wants to close the gap between government programmes and the daily realities faced by farmers.

"We are bringing services to the people so that we understand what farmers are struggling with and close that gap," he said. "This will help us achieve our key priorities, including food sovereignty and wealth creation."

For livestock farmers, stock theft emerged as the biggest concern. Farmers said stolen cattle and goats represent years of investment lost

overnight, affecting household income, herd growth and confidence in livestock farming.

Tshawuka said government is reviewing the law to strengthen enforcement and increase fines for those involved in stock theft.

Recent figures show the seriousness of the problem. In 2023, about 1,815 cattle worth roughly E15 million were stolen. Between April and June 2024, about 1,325 livestock were stolen, including 582 cattle and 743 goats, valued at approximately E6.5 million.

The Minister said tackling stock theft requires coordinated action,

including cross-border cooperation. Government is working with South African authorities, NDMA and domestic security forces to disrupt illegal livestock movement along high-risk routes.

At community level, farmers are also being encouraged to establish secure livestock holding areas, known as gaskits. Through the Department of Veterinary Services, farmers have been sensitised on how these facilities can help protect animals. Chiefs in Mhlambanyatsi have been tasked with identifying land for the holding areas, allowing farmers to keep and feed cattle within the community instead of moving them to Maphiveni.

Mhlambanyatsi Member of Parliament Bonginkosi Dlamini welcomed the initiative, saying it brought government closer to farmers while addressing real production challenges.

Beyond livestock security, farmers raised strong concerns over water shortages. They said limited access to water continues to affect crop establishment, field management and yields, especially for smallholder farmers seeking to increase production.

Tshawuka said the Ministry is working with Micro Projects to improve community water infrastructure and support agricultural productivity.

"Access to water is critical for agriculture, and we are working to ensure that communities are supported with the necessary infrastructure," he said.

The Ministry also used the visit to promote the Smallholder Agricultural Productivity Enhancement and Marketing Project, known as SAPEMP. Implemented with partners such as EWADE, the E851 million project is designed to move smallholder farmers from subsistence production into

commercial agriculture through productive infrastructure, improved farming systems and stronger market linkages.

Farmers were told that SAPEMP is already working with 40 chiefdoms and will continue expanding over several years. A key part of the model is farmer clustering, where producers organise themselves into groups to improve planning, input access, production coordination and market supply.

This approach is expected to strengthen agricultural value chains, improve productivity and create employment opportunities in rural communities.

Farmers welcomed the decentralisation of services. Babe Msibi said the community appreciated the Ministry's visit and the encouragement being given to producers, but stressed that stock theft remains a major concern.

She also welcomed the processing of permits, known as mapasi, at the Inkhundla, saying this would reduce the cost and time of travelling to Mbabane.

Mlindazwe Bucopho Njabulo Dlamini said the engagement helped farmers understand available support programmes.

"We thank the Ministry for this initiative because it connects us to projects that can support our farming. But the issue of livestock theft is serious because we do not rest," he said.

The engagement highlighted the need to protect livestock, improve water access, decentralise services and link farmers to practical opportunities. For Mhlambanyatsi farmers, these interventions could help build a stronger, safer and more commercially focused agricultural future.



Minister of Agriculture, Mandla Tshawuka addressing farmers at Mhlambanyatsi Inkhundla.



Member of Parliament at Mhlambanyatsi Inkhundla, Bonginkosi Dlamini.

PHILANI MASWATI LAUNCHES 114 000 FEEDLOT PROJECT TO HOUSE 50 CATTLE

BY: PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

A new E114 000 cattle feedlot project targeting a capacity of 50 animals at a time is set to come online at the Philani Maswati Charity Organization centre in Mantjonga, positioning the facility as an emerging agribusiness hub amid a contracting national feedlot sector.

The project, confirmed by Chairman Lutfo Dlamini, is designed to shift the centre from donor dependence toward a self-sustaining production model anchored in beef value addition. It comes at a time when Eswatini's feedlot industry has been severely weakened by the ongoing Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak, which has reduced operational feedlots from 619 registered units to just 212, a 65.75% decline.

Dlamini said the Mantjonga feedlot would not only supply meat for the centre's internal consumption but also generate income through surplus sales, with a potential market linkage to Eswatini Meat Industries.

The facility is expected to be operational by September, funded partly through proceeds from the organisation's annual Biggest Braai initiative.

"Our mandate is clear, to build a self-sustaining institution that can feed itself and generate income," Dlamini said.

"This feedlot is not just a project, it is a long-term investment into food security, dignity and economic participation for the people we care



Philani Maswati Chairman, Lutfo Dlamini.

for."

He added that technical guidance from the Ministry of Agriculture has already been secured, with further support being mobilised from private sector partners and volunteers to complete infrastructure requirements.

Beyond livestock, Philani Maswati has already established a diversified agricultural base. The centre operates vegetable production units, supported by a solar-powered irrigation system, with produce feeding residents and supplying local markets.

Recently, the organisation secured E140,000 funding from KFC Eswatini to rehabilitate storm-damaged greenhouses, further

strengthening its production capacity.

Dlamini said integrating feedlot operations into this existing system would create a closed-loop model where crop residues can support cattle feeding, while livestock manure enhances soil fertility, improving overall productivity.

"For us, agriculture is not a side activity, it is the backbone of our sustainability strategy," he said.

"We are building a system where every component supports the other, from vegetables to livestock."

From a sectoral perspective, the project arrives at a critical juncture. Feedlotting remains a cornerstone of Eswatini's livestock value

chain, enabling faster weight gain, consistent meat quality and access to premium markets.

However, the sector has been under sustained pressure from high feed costs, limited financing and disease outbreaks.

Minister of Agriculture Mandla Tshawuka recently described FMD as the "heaviest blow" to the industry, noting that movement restrictions, biosecurity measures and declining investor confidence have slowed recovery.

Despite this, small and emerging feedlots such as Mantjonga's are increasingly seen as part of the rebuilding strategy, particularly in high cattle density regions such as Manzini, Lubombo and Hhohho. With proper management, a 50-head feedlot operating on a standard 90-day finishing cycle can turn over multiple batches annually, creating a steady income stream and stimulating local supply chains, including feed suppliers, veterinary services and transport operators.

Commenting on the initiative, veterinary expert Dr Pride Shongwe from the Ministry of Agriculture said the project demonstrates resilience within the sector despite current challenges.

"This is the kind of initiative that keeps the industry alive during difficult times," she said.

"Feedlots are critical for beef production and value addition. While FMD has disrupted operations across the country, we are confident that with ongoing vaccination and control measures, the disease will be contained and eventually eradicated."

She noted that the outbreak continues to affect productivity, market access and farmer confidence, but emphasised that sustained investment in structured systems such as feedlots will be key to recovery.

At the national level, Prime Minister Russell Mmiso Dlamini has urged farmers to comply strictly with disease control measures, warning that non-compliance and illegal livestock movement risk prolonging the outbreak. The Minister of Agriculture has also raised alarm over the theft of veterinary cordon fences along border areas, describing it as a major setback in efforts to contain the disease.

Against this backdrop, the Mantjonga feedlot represents more than a production unit. It is a social enterprise with direct human impact. The facility will supply a reliable protein source to elderly residents housed at the Philani centre, improving nutrition while creating opportunities for skills development and community participation in agricultural activities.

In practical terms, the project introduces a replicable model, blending social welfare with commercial agriculture. By linking production to market systems and integrating crop and livestock operations, it demonstrates how small-scale investments can yield both economic and social returns.

For farmers in surrounding regions, the implications are tangible. Increased demand for weaner cattle, feed inputs and veterinary services could stimulate local markets, while partnerships with processors such as Embiveni offer pathways into formal value chains.

The broader lesson is structural. Even as the national feedlot sector contracts under pressure, targeted investments, disciplined management and institutional support can rebuild capacity from the ground up.

"If we get this right, we are not just feeding our centre," Dlamini said. "We are contributing to rebuilding the livestock sector, one project at a time."

In a sector grappling with

contraction, the Mantjonga feedlot signals cautious optimism, that recovery may not come from scale alone, but from well-executed, initiatives.

WORKSHOP TO BUSINESS: MELULEKI MKHONTA BUILDS OYSTER MUSHROOM ENTERPRISE

BY: SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST

What began as a free training opportunity has grown into a promising agribusiness venture for Meluleki Mkhonta, a young farmer from Velezizweni in Mankayane who is turning oyster mushroom production into a reliable source of income while steadily building a diversified farming business.

Mkhonta, a student of Environmental Science at the University of South Africa (UNISA), ventured into mushroom farming in 2021 after attending a free workshop hosted by the Malkerns Agricultural Research Station under the Ministry of Agriculture. The training introduced him to the fundamentals of oyster mushroom production, from substrate preparation to hygiene management, and he moved quickly to apply the knowledge.

“I attended the workshop and gained knowledge, and from there I started farming oyster mushrooms,” he said.

Today, he has 120 mushroom bags in production and has already produced two batches this year, yielding four 20-litre buckets of oyster mushrooms.

His enterprise is emerging in a market with clear potential. Oyster mushroom production remains relatively underdeveloped in Eswatini despite strong demand, with previous studies showing that more than 95 percent of mushrooms consumed locally are imported. For producers

able to supply consistently, that gap presents a strong opportunity.

Mkhonta said mushroom production begins with substrate preparation, using either straw grass or sawdust. Rather than being limited by lack of equipment, he found a way to turn that challenge into another business opportunity. He invested in a grass cutter and now cuts grass for community members, earning income while also securing raw materials for his own production.



Meluleki Mkhonta, oyster mushroom farmer from Mankayane Velezizweni.

“I cut grass for people and in return I also get the grass to use in my farming,” he said.

His model reflects a practical circular approach to farming, where biomass that might otherwise go to

waste is converted into a productive input. The grass is dried and mixed with bran to improve nutrient content. Where sawdust is used, he adds about two percent lime to reduce acidity, while molasses can also be used in some areas to enrich the substrate.

Once prepared, the substrate is packed into one-kilogram plastic bags, after which sterilisation becomes critical. Mkhonta said the bags are boiled at 100 degrees

Celsius for between four and six hours to eliminate harmful bacteria and create a suitable environment for mushroom growth. While the research station uses specialised equipment, he has developed his own simpler system to reduce costs and improve convenience.

After sterilisation, the bags are cooled, inoculated with spawn, sealed and placed in a dark room for incubation. After about six weeks, the bags turn white, signalling successful colonisation and healthy mushroom development. Mkhonta sources his spawn from the Malkerns Agricultural Research Station, noting that one bag of spawn can produce up to 30 bags of mushrooms.

For him, the real challenge is not just production, but consistency.

“When you approach big buyers, they want consistency. They want someone who can supply all the time,” he said.

To meet that requirement, he produces in cycles. He currently supplies restaurants, including Chinese-owned establishments, as well as local customers.

His journey has also taught him that input quality can determine success or loss. He recalled one batch that failed after he used old hay, forcing him to throw everything away.

“I once bought hay that was too old and I had to dispose of the whole batch,” he said.

Beyond mushrooms, Mkhonta has expanded into tomato production and broilers, building a more resilient farming enterprise. He is also sharing his knowledge with others, saying oyster mushroom farming is simple, profitable and accessible even to people with full-time jobs.

“This is something even employed people can do. It is simple, it has a market, and it makes money,” he said.

He believes young people, in particular, should begin to see agriculture as a business rather than a last option.

“Young people must not only



Oyster mushroom spawn.

go to school and wait for jobs. The knowledge they gain should be used as a foundation to start businesses and make money,” he said.

Mkhonta’s journey reflects the growing potential of high-value enterprises such as oyster mushroom production in Eswatini. With low land requirements, relatively short production cycles and a market still largely open to local producers, the enterprise offers a practical entry point for youth in agriculture.

His story is also a reminder that innovation in farming does not always begin with large capital. Sometimes it starts with training, observation and the ability to turn ordinary local resources into a viable business. In Mankayane, Meluleki Mkhonta is showing how knowledge, persistence and resourcefulness can transform a workshop lesson into a growing agribusiness.



Oyster mushroom sample ready for harvest.



ENTREPRENEURIAL LIVESTOCK TRAININGS IN ESWATINI: DRIVING SUSTAINABLE AGRARIAN LIVELIHOODS THROUGH PPPs



BY: MNCEDISI SIMELANE | FEEDMASTER TECHNICAL ADVISER

Entrepreneurial livestock training has emerged as a transformative strategy for strengthening rural economies in Eswatini. Through a collaborative model involving Feedmaster Eswatini and the Ministry of Agriculture Eswatini, farmers are being empowered with practical skills, business acumen, and technical knowledge necessary to succeed in modern livestock production. Anchored under the Public, Private Partnerships (PPPs) framework, these trainings are designed to promote a sustainable agrarian lifestyle that ensures food security and improved livelihoods across rural communities.

The Vision: Sustainable Agrarian Livelihoods

At the core of these trainings lies a clear and strategic objective: to build

that can produce food, generate income, and contribute to national agricultural productivity. This approach recognizes that agriculture is not merely a subsistence activity but a viable entrepreneurial pathway capable of transforming rural livelihoods.

By equipping farmers with both technical and business-oriented skills, the program supports:

- Household food security through local production
- Income generation through market-oriented farming
- Employment creation, especially among youth
- Reduced dependency on food imports

The emphasis is on long-term sustainability, ensuring that farmers can maintain productivity beyond the training phase.

The PPP Model: Strengthening Collaboration for Impact

The success of these entrepreneurial livestock trainings is rooted in the synergy between public and private sector stakeholders. Under the PPP framework:

- Feedmaster Eswatini provides expertise in animal nutrition, feed formulation, and production efficiency
- The Ministry of Agriculture Eswatini delivers extension services, policy support, and farmer mobilization

This partnership creates a holistic support system where farmers benefit from both scientific knowledge and institutional backing. The PPP model ensures:

- Access to reliable technical information
- Coordination of training

- programs across regions
- Alignment with national agricultural development goals
- Improved resource utilization and scalability

As a result, the trainings are not isolated events but part of a coordinated national effort to uplift the agricultural sector.

Scope of Trainings: Diverse Livestock Enterprises

The entrepreneurial livestock trainings are multi-disciplinary, covering key livestock enterprises that are critical to Eswatini's food systems. These include: Poultry Production (Broilers and Layers)

Poultry remains one of the most accessible and profitable livestock enterprises for smallholder farmers. Trainings focus on:

- Broiler production cycles and profitability
- Layer management for consistent egg production
- Housing design, biosecurity, and disease control
- Feed programs aligned to growth stages

Farmers are trained to operate poultry enterprises as business ventures, emphasizing record keeping, cost management, and market linkages.

Pig Production

Pig farming offers rapid turnover and high returns when properly managed. Training modules cover:

- Breed selection and housing systems
- Feeding regimes for different growth stages
- Reproductive management and piglet care
- Waste management and environmental sustainability

Participants are encouraged to adopt climate-smart pig production practices, ensuring efficiency while minimizing environmental impact.

Beef Production

Beef production training targets both

emerging and established farmers, focusing on:

- Beef production through feed lotting
- Herd management and breeding strategies
- Pasture and rangeland management
- Supplementary feeding during dry seasons
- Disease prevention and veterinary care

This component strengthens food security and income diversification, particularly in rural areas with grazing land.



Entrepreneurial Focus: Farming as a Business

A distinguishing feature of these trainings is their strong emphasis on entrepreneurship. Farmers are guided to transition from traditional practices to commercially viable operations. Key entrepreneurial components include:

- Business planning and enterprise budgeting
- Cost-benefit analysis and profitability tracking
- Market identification and product branding
- Risk management and financial

literacy

By integrating business principles into livestock production, the program ensures that farmers are not only producers but also agripreneurs capable of scaling their operations.

Financial Support: Enabling Enterprise Establishment

A critical pillar of the training model is the integration of financial support mechanisms to ensure that knowledge gained translates into real, operational enterprises. Financial institutions such as the Eswatini Agricultural Development Fund

(EADF), Youth Enterprise Revolving Fund (YERF), and Eswatini Bank play a vital role in this ecosystem.

These institutions provide soft, revolving start-up loans designed to:

- Support establishment of livestock enterprises
- Finance infrastructure such as housing and equipment
- Facilitate procurement of inputs including feed and stock
- Encourage youth participation through accessible funding models

Importantly, funding is often linked to viable and approved business

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plans, ensuring that investments are sustainable and productive. This financing approach strengthens the PPP model by bridging the gap between training and implementation, enabling farmers to transition from learning to doing.

Enhancing Food Security and Rural Livelihoods

The impact of these trainings extends beyond individual farmers to entire communities. By promoting diversified livestock production, households gain access to:

- Protein-rich foods such as meat and eggs
- Stable income streams from livestock sales
- Improved resilience against economic shocks

Under the PPP model, the combined efforts of Feedmaster and the Ministry of Agriculture ensure that knowledge dissemination is inclusive and far-reaching, targeting rural populations that are often underserved.

This approach directly contributes to:

- Reduction of rural poverty
- Strengthening of local food systems
- Empowerment of youth and women in agriculture

Building Capacity for the Future Sustainability is achieved not only

through production but also through continuous capacity building. The trainings are structured to encourage:

- Knowledge sharing among farmers
- Formation of farmer groups and cooperatives
- Ongoing mentorship and technical support

Farmers are also introduced to innovative practices and technologies, enabling them to adapt to changing environmental and market conditions.

Conclusion

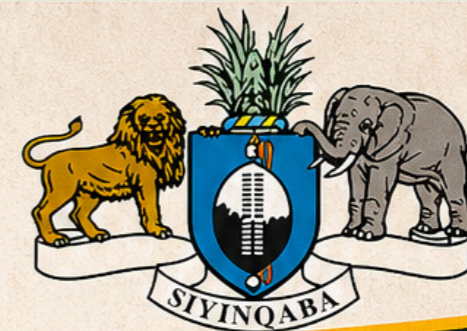
Entrepreneurial livestock trainings conducted by Feedmaster Eswatini in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture represent a powerful model for rural development. Through the PPP framework, supported by financial partners such as EADF, YERF, and Eswatini Bank, these initiatives are transforming agriculture into a driver of economic growth, food security, and improved livelihoods. By focusing on poultry, pig, layer, and beef production, and embedding strong entrepreneurial principles alongside accessible financing, the program equips farmers with the tools needed to thrive in a competitive agricultural landscape.

Readers are encouraged to follow the Feedmaster Eswatini Facebook page to stay updated on monthly

scheduled trainings. This platform provides timely information on upcoming farmer capacitation programs, ensuring continuous learning and exposure to modern agricultural practices. By staying connected, farmers can enhance their skills, adopt innovative techniques, and remain competitive in the evolving livestock sector, ultimately strengthening household food security and sustainable livelihoods.

TRAINING DATES:

- 2 Day Broiler Training in Mbabane Library on the 7th & 8th May 2026
- 1 Day Layer Training in Mbabane Library on the 11th May 2026.
- 2 Day Pig Training in Manzini Library of the 12th and 13th May in Manzini Library.



Mbabane 2-Day Broiler Broiler Training

Date: 7th & 8th May 2026 | Venue: Mbabane Library
Time: 0900hrs to 1400hrs

ENTRANCE IS FREE!

Topics to be Discussed:

- ✓ Procedure in Siting and Building a broiler house
- ✓ Chick Quality Identification
- ✓ Broiler Management Practices
- ✓ Feeds and Feeding
- ✓ Branding & Marketing
- ✓ Broiler Business Record Keeping & Economics
- ✓ Broiler Business Funders



Feedmaster
Your Quality Solution

Africa Chicks
INTSANDVO
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EADF
ESWATINI AGRICULTURE
DEVELOPMENT FUND

Youth
Entrepreneur Revolving Fund
"giving you a head start to success"



Contact: 76479360

94 TONNES OF TRADITIONAL VEGETABLES NEEDED FOR 42 SCHOOLS IN 2026



Taiwan-Africa Vegetable Initiative (TAVI) Project Manager at the World Vegetable Center, Dr Sophia Chan.

By Sibusisiwe Ndzimandze | Journalist

TAVI Phase II shifts from pilot to market, with schools set to demand 95 tonnes of traditional vegetables, creating a direct supply opportunity for smallholder farmers.

The Taiwan-Africa Vegetable Initiative (TAVI) Phase II is moving into a more market-driven stage, with 42 participating schools expected to require 95,000kg of traditional African vegetables in 2026, creating a structured supply opportunity for smallholder farmers.

Launched during an inception workshop at the George Hotel in Manzini, the new school component is expected to reach 22,868 children through school feeding, school gardens and nutrition education. To sustain that system, at least 84 smallholder farmers are expected to supply fresh traditional African vegetables directly to schools.

The new target reflects a major shift in the programme. While Phase I focused on introducing the model through school gardens, teacher and cook training, and nutrition education, Phase II is now expected to solve a practical challenge that emerged during implementation: schools embraced indigenous vegetables, but supply remained

insufficient and inconsistent.

Phase I had already laid a strong foundation. The programme supported 16 pilot schools and eight control schools with gardening tools valued at E450,000, helping schools integrate traditional vegetable production into learning, nutrition and climate-resilient agriculture. It later grew into a wider educational movement, reaching more than 9,000 learners and building awareness, confidence and practical farming skills around traditional vegetables.

Now, however, Phase II is raising the bar. Schools are no longer just learning sites; they are becoming structured demand points in a farm-to-school system that links education, nutrition and agriculture more directly.

Presenting the project overview, TAVI Project Manager Dr Sophia Chan of the World Vegetable Center said the new phase is focused on stronger collaboration, clearer responsibilities and sustainable implementation.

“This is an opportunity for all of us to align on our shared objectives, strengthen coordination, clarify

roles and responsibilities, and ensure effective and sustainable implementation,” she said.

Chan said the programme combines school gardens, school feeding and nutrition education, while also linking schools directly with local farmers.

“Through this integrated model, we are not only improving access to nutritious food, but also creating learning environments where healthy habits can be practiced daily,” she said.

Speaking on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture, Principal Secretary Representative Nhlanhla Motsa, Under Secretary, said the current phase is deliberately moving beyond pilot support into more structured and commercially viable systems.

“Through this approach, we are not only improving nutrition in schools, but also creating sustainable market opportunities for our smallholder farmers,” he said.

From the Ministry of Education and Training, Lubombo Regional Education Officer Richard Dlamini said schools must move beyond

viewing traditional vegetables simply as a gardening activity and begin integrating them more deliberately into learner welfare, school feeding and practical education.

“This programme is not just about growing vegetables. It is about improving learner health, strengthening practical learning and ensuring that schools become centres of sustainable development,” he said.

Nathi Dlamini, Senior Inspector of Schools in the Ministry of Agriculture, urged headteachers and focal teachers from the 42 participating schools to integrate indigenous vegetables into both school gardens and daily meals.

“Early exposure is key to building lifelong consumption habits,” he said, noting that traditional African vegetables are nutrient-dense, climate-resilient and essential for dietary diversity, healthy body systems and sustainable agriculture.

At school level, however, concerns remain over production space. Thulani Thwala, Headteacher of Enhlanhleri Methodist Primary School, welcomed the initiative but said limited land remains one of the biggest barriers to expansion.

“We appreciate this programme, but land remains a challenge. If more land can be made available, schools and communities can expand production, create opportunities for young people and improve access to nutritious traditional vegetables,” he said.

His remarks go to the heart of Phase II: the schools are in place, the demand has been quantified and the market has effectively been created, but production must now rise to match it.

That wider commercial opportunity was reinforced during a Traditional African Vegetables webinar hosted by Agribusiness Media on April 9, where World Vegetable Center Farmer Coordinator Thabiso Nkambule said the market already exists, but farmers need stronger seed systems, better organisation and more reliable value chains to supply it.

Data shared during that webinar



showed that Eswatini’s annual vegetable demand stands at about 41.5 million kilogrammes, while local production still leaves an estimated 82 percent supply gap. Traditional vegetables such as pumpkin leaves, amaranth and okra are increasingly being recognised not only as nutrient-dense, climate-smart crops, but also as commercially viable products with real and growing demand.

In that context, the 95-tonne school target under TAVI Phase II is more than a feeding requirement. It is a practical example of how indigenous vegetables are moving from subsistence production into structured markets.

For smallholder farmers, the opportunity is now clearer than ever. For schools, the programme offers a pathway to more reliable access to fresh, nutritious produce. And for the country, it signals that traditional African vegetables are no longer just crops of heritage they are becoming part of Eswatini’s commercial agriculture future.



Some of the indigenous seeds displayed during the TAVI Phase II inception workshop held at the George Hotel.

THE COST OF HESITATION: WHY ACTION ALWAYS OUTPACES THEORY IN AGRIBUSINESS

BY: MCEBO EMMANUEL MNISI

Mcebo Emmanuel Mnisi is an impact-driven Biologist and Agricultural Development Strategist with over 15 years of experience scaling agribusiness value chains across Eswatini.



In the boardroom, we call it analysis paralysis. On the farm, we call it a lost season.

While the scientific community and ag-tech innovators provide us with a constant stream of data, recommendations, and theoretical frameworks, there is a hard truth that every successful producer eventually learns: The soil and the stall do not wait for certainty. In the high-stakes world of agribusiness, the gap between a profitable year and a crushing loss is often measured not by the depth of a farmer's knowledge but by the speed of their execution.

It is easy to get overwhelmed by the scale of modern agriculture. We look at thousand-acre pivots or massive feedlot expansions and think progress requires a monumental leap. But successful operations are rarely built on singular, massive gambles. Instead, they are built on the philosophy of the small win.

Consider the anthill: it begins with a single grain of sand. To an observer, that first grain seems insignificant, almost invisible. Yet, through relentless perseverance and the patience to stack one grain upon another, it becomes a tower.

In farming, that grain of sand is the decision to act on one small recommendation today; calibrating a single nozzle, testing a new mineral block, or shifting a gate two hours earlier. These small, timely actions aggregate. While the theorist is waiting for the resources to build a skyscraper, the action-oriented farmer is already halfway through building their tower, one grain at a time.

The Agronomic Feedback Loop: Learning at the Speed of Life

Theory is a map, but action is the territory. In cropping, the feedback loop is the most powerful tool in a grower's arsenal. When a farmer takes a new recommendation and implements it immediately, they trigger a real-time education that no seminar can replicate.

Early Failure is a Cheap Teacher: Implementing a new technique early allows for mid-course corrections. If a planter setting is slightly off, the proactive farmer sees the emergence issues in week two and adjusts.

Contextual Mastery: No white paper can account for the micro-climate of a specific 40-acre block. True agronomic intelligence is gathered through the hands, not just

the eyes.

Compounded Gains: Much like the anthill, these small adjustments compound. The farmer who acts today is already refining their 2027 strategy based on 2026 data.

Livestock: Where Hesitation Becomes a Welfare Issue

In livestock production, the "action vs. theory" debate moves from the ledger to the living. In a cow-calf operation, a feedlot, or a dairy, the biological clock doesn't just tick; it pulses.

| Factor | The Theoretical Approach | The Action-Oriented Approach |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Herd Health | Waiting for a third lab confirmation before treating a pen. | Acting on the first sign of clinical symptoms to break the cycle. |
| Genetics | Studying EPDs for three seasons before switching bulls. | Implementing a trial AI program this cycle to see real-world calf vigor. |
| Pasture | Following a rigid calendar-based grazing plan. | Moving the herd based on today's forage height and soil moisture. |

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hesitation is expensive. An extra 48 hours of "observing" a respiratory breakout can be the difference between a single treated calf and a mass-morbidity event. The farmer who acts on a nutritional recommendation, perhaps adjusting a ration to include a more cost-effective byproduct, sees the impact on Average Daily Gain (ADG) immediately.

The hesitant producer often operates under the illusion that waiting for more information reduces risk. In reality, in a biological system, waiting is the highest-risk move available.

Whether it's waiting for the "perfect" weather window to cut hay or the "perfect" market price to hedge cattle, the overthinker is perpetually solving last year's problems. They find themselves applying yesterday's solutions to today's crises, leaving them one step behind the curve and several thousand/ millions of Emalangeni behind the market.

Agribusiness is an industry of "good enough" executed brilliantly. A perfect nutrient plan applied three weeks too late is objectively inferior to a "pretty good" plan applied on the day the crop needs it most.

"Knowledge is a latent asset; it only realizes value at the moment of application."

The field and the fold are relentless teachers. They don't care about your intentions, your research, or your "plans for next year." They only respond to what you do today. You don't need a perfect, finished tower to start; you need to move that first grain of sand.

In the race between the theorist and the practitioner, the farmer who moves even imperfectly will always

find themselves at the finish line while the overthinker is still at the gate.

Stop analyzing the season. Start winning it.



THE RETIREMENT ARCHITECT: HOW LUCAS SHONGWE CALCULATED A FUTURE BEYOND WORK

BY: NOSIPHO MKHIZE | JOURNALIST



Most people see retirement as a finish line, a moment to slow down after decades of work. But for 91-year-old Lucas Shongwe, retirement was never an ending. It was a carefully calculated beginning.

From the quiet fields near the Inyoni Yami Swaziland Irrigation Scheme, Shongwe has built a thriving mango enterprise that has sustained him, educated his children, and shielded him from the harsh realities of post-retirement poverty.

A LIFE ROOTED IN NUMBERS AND NATURE

Born with a sharp mind for numbers, Shongwe studied accounting during his high school years at Mbombela High School. He did his primary education at Mashobeni Primary. His professional journey led him to the Inyoni Yami Swaziland Irrigation Scheme, where he worked in accounts but found himself increasingly drawn to agriculture, particularly mango trees.

That dual exposure to finance

and farming would later define his success.

“I realised that numbers alone were not enough; I needed something that could grow beyond my working years,” he reflects.

Even as he worked behind a desk, he began to observe, learn, and plan. A short six-month agriculture course at Mbombela sharpened his practical understanding, while his accounting background helped him think long-term.

PLANNING BEFORE THE PAYCHEQUE STOPS

Unlike many who wait until retirement to figure things out, Shongwe began preparing years in advance. Before his official retirement on 30 November 1990, he had already taken decisive steps, buying mango seedlings, installing irrigation pipes, and securing access to water from a nearby river, called the Mlumati River.

This foresight ensured that when he transitioned into retirement in 1991, he was not starting from zero.

“Before I left work, I had already planted trees and installed irrigation

because I did not want to experience poverty,” he says.

Today, his orchard boasts approximately 800 mango trees at the location of Msahweni, Matsamo, a testament to decades of patience, discipline, and strategic thinking.

THE BUSINESS OF MANGOES

Mango farming is not an overnight success story. Shongwe understood this from the beginning. Mango trees take four to five years to mature and begin producing fruit, requiring both patience and consistent care.

His farming approach is simple but effective: reliable irrigation using river water, careful monitoring of tree health, and timing the market.

Mangoes typically ripen between late November and early December. As harvest season approaches, Shongwe activates his network of buyers, mainly informal traders who come directly to his farm.

They inspect the fruit, assess ripeness, and purchase in bulk, often by the crate, before distributing to local communities.

“When the mangoes are almost ready, I call my buyers, and they come to check the quality before buying in bulk,” he explains.

This direct-to-market approach eliminates middlemen and ensures steady cash flow.

SUPPORTING A FAMILY THROUGH AGRICULTURE

Shongwe is not just a farmer; he is a provider. As a father, he has used his mango business to support his household and secure his children’s education.

At the height of his production, proceeds from mango sales were sufficient to cover tuition fees for four of his children for an entire year.

His story underscores the power of agriculture not just as a livelihood, but as a tool for generational upliftment.

CHALLENGES IN THE ORCHARD

Like any farmer, Shongwe has faced setbacks. Theft has occasionally threatened his harvest, while pests, particularly mango leafhoppers, have posed risks to productivity.

Yet, his resilience has remained unwavering. Years of experience have taught him how to manage these challenges through vigilance, timely intervention, and consistent farm management practices.

LESSONS FROM THE RETIREMENT ARCHITECT

Lucas Shongwe’s journey highlights the importance of starting early, as careful planning before retirement can create a smooth and secure transition into the next phase of life. His story also underscores the value of investing wisely, particularly in long-term crops like mangoes, which require patience but ultimately deliver sustainable returns. By leveraging his background in accounting alongside practical farming knowledge, he was able to make informed decisions that strengthened his enterprise. Equally important is his focus on building direct markets, cultivating strong relationships with buyers to ensure a

consistent and reliable income stream year after year.

Above all, his story is a reminder that retirement is not about stopping; it is about repositioning.

At 91, Shongwe continues to tend to his orchard, a living legacy of foresight and determination. Where others saw an ending, he saw an opportunity, and he calculated it well.



UNESWA TURNS LUYENGO INTO A LIVING CLASSROOM FOR FARMING WITH NATURE

By Nosipho Mkhize | Journalist



(L-R) Arabica coffee variety grown at the agroecology demonstration site at Luyengo campus and participants being briefed on how the crops are performing in the field.

At the University of Eswatini’s Luyengo Campus, farming is being reimagined as a partnership with nature rather than a struggle against it.

With support from PELUM Association Eswatini and Eswatini Coffee, UNESWA has launched an Agroecology Demonstration Site designed as a living laboratory for farmers, students, researchers and development partners. The site promotes resilient, low-external-input farming systems that strengthen soil functionality, improve productivity stability and support sustainable rural

livelihoods.

Currently planted at the site are macadamia, different coffee varieties and sweet potato varieties. The coffee includes Eswatini’s Manzini and Arabica varieties, grown under two production conditions: shaded environments and open-field systems. This allows farmers to observe differences in growth, adaptability and crop performance under real field conditions.

The comparison is important because coffee is widely recognised as a crop that can benefit from agroforestry systems. Research on

shaded coffee shows that tree cover can reduce heat stress, improve humidity, protect plants during dry periods and support biodiversity.

At Luyengo, this principle is being tested practically. Farmers are able to see how shade, soil cover and surrounding vegetation can influence plant health and possibly quality. This turns the site into more than a demonstration plot; it becomes a place where farmers can make informed decisions based on observation.

Sweet potato varieties such as Melinda, Namanga and Ininda are also being showcased, highlighting the value of crop diversification in

sustainable farming systems. By integrating crops with different growth patterns, farmers can spread risk, make better use of land and strengthen food security.

Turmeric has not yet been planted but is planned for future inclusion, which will further expand the site’s crop diversification model.

The launch comes at a time when climate pressure is forcing farmers to rethink production systems. The Food and Agriculture Organization notes that agroecology supports soil health, biodiversity and resource efficiency, while diversified and integrated production systems help farmers adapt to climate change.

For farmers attending the launch, the value of the site lies in its practical nature. It provides hands-on insights into agronomic practices, crop management and production choices that can be adapted to their own farms.

The initiative also strengthens collaboration between farmers, researchers and development partners, creating a shared platform for knowledge exchange and innovation. In an environment of rising input costs, soil degradation and unpredictable weather, such learning spaces are becoming increasingly important.



Ultimately, the UNESWA Agroecology Demonstration Site is not only about coffee, macadamia and sweet potatoes. It is about showing that agriculture can become more productive and resilient when designed around natural systems.

At Luyengo, that lesson is now growing in the field.



FROM SMALLHOLDER TO MARKET-DRIVEN AGRIBUSINESS: A SIGCAWENI HORTICULTURE FARMER'S TRANSFORMATION

BY: SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST

In a community where water shortages often define the limits of agricultural production, Welile Hlophe of Sigcaweni East under Mpolonjeni Inkhundla has chosen not to scale down her ambitions. Instead, she has steadily built a horticulture enterprise through resilience, reinvestment and production choices shaped increasingly by the market.

Producing beetroot, butternut and tomatoes, Hlophe has grown her operation despite the twin pressures of limited water availability and rising input costs. She now cultivates about 1.3 hectares across two plots, with roughly 6,000 plants under production, turning what began as a modest livelihood effort into a more organised farming business.

Her entry into farming was driven by the need to earn a living, but her progress has been built on a consistent pattern of reinvesting back into the enterprise. Over time, profits from production were channelled into practical upgrades such as water pipes and irrigation equipment, allowing her to strengthen efficiency and gradually expand capacity.

Hlophe's journey began in 2012, when she joined a group of 30 farmers operating under a shared production system. But what started as a group-based model eventually evolved into an individual enterprise after she made the decision to begin farming independently.

"It was not easy. Water was a big challenge for us." – Welile Hlophe

Water, she said, has remained one

of the biggest constraints throughout her farming journey. In the early years, farmers in the area relied on abstracting water from nearby sources using pumps and shared distribution systems, an arrangement that proved both costly and difficult to manage. At one stage, the group depended on metered water, with usage reaching as high as 10,000 litres per month, sharply raising production costs.

The challenges were not only technical, but organisational as well.

While the farmers were still operating as a group, they received a pump through support from Integrated Rural Development (IRD) to assist with irrigation. Members were expected to save money each month after harvest to cover servicing and repairs. But tensions emerged when some contributed to the maintenance fund while others did not, yet still expected equal access to the system when irrigation was needed.

For Hlophe, the arrangement became unsustainable. Those who paid felt burdened by those who did not, and the imbalance eventually pushed her to leave the group setup and establish her own farming operation at home, where she could manage her resources and production decisions more effectively.

In those early years of operating independently, irrigation was still highly labour-intensive. Water was applied manually using pipes, a demanding process that limited the area she could cover in a single day.

"We used to irrigate using pipes plant by plant. It was hard work and

we could not cover the whole field in a day." Welile Hlophe

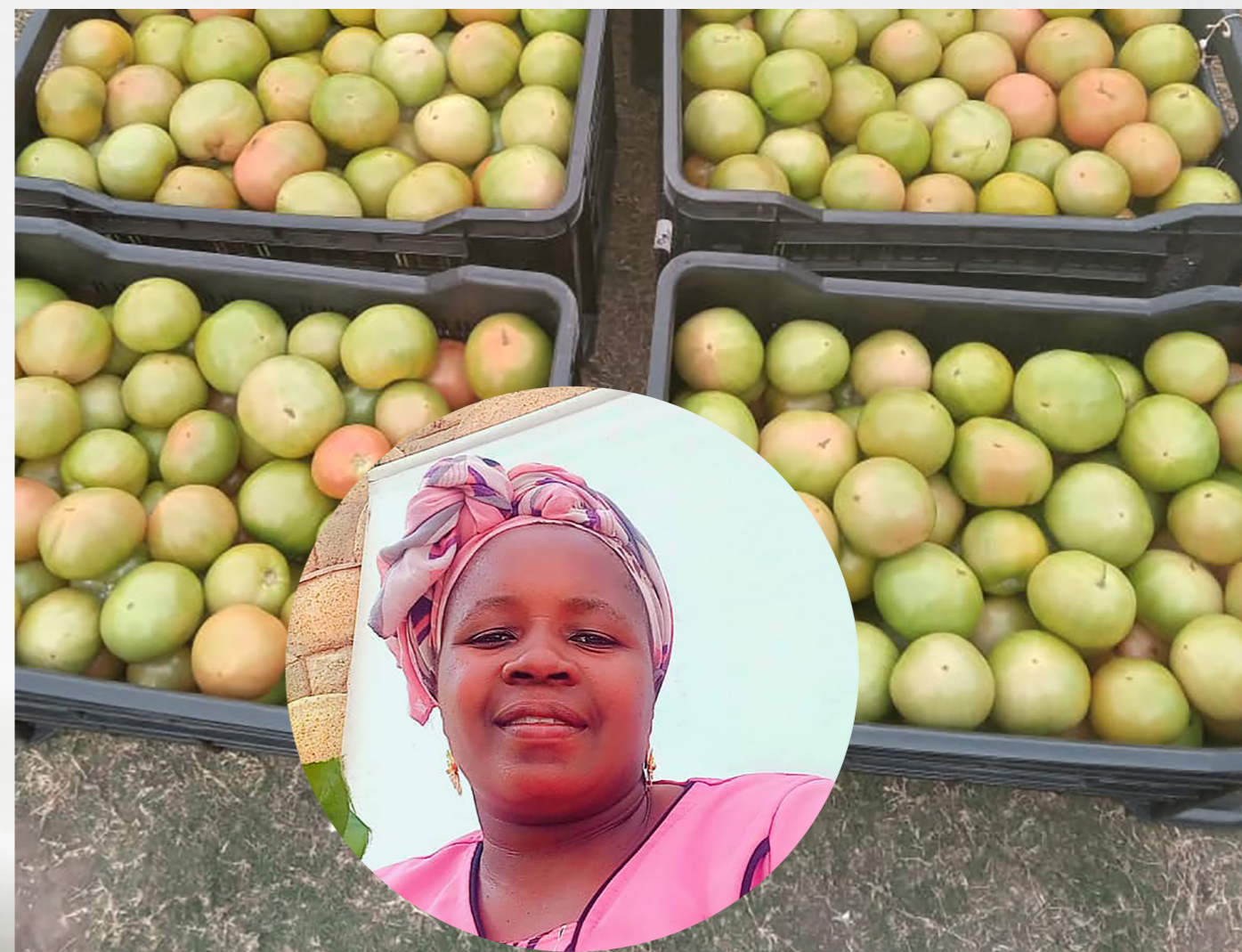
Even so, she continued to build. Using income generated from produce sales, she gradually increased the number of pipes in her system, improving her ability to move water from a nearby river across the field and manage production more efficiently.

That reinvestment later paved the way for a more significant shift: the adoption of drip irrigation. The system has improved water-use efficiency by delivering water directly to the root zone, enabling better soil moisture management and more uniform crop growth under water-constrained conditions.

Like many smallholder farmers, Hlophe initially sold her produce through informal channels, where both prices and market access were often uncertain. Her turning point came when extension officers introduced her to the National Agricultural Marketing Board (NAMBoard) and encouraged farmers to move into contract farming arrangements tied to a defined market.

"We were encouraged to sign contracts so that when we plant, we already know where we will sell." – Welile Hlophe

That shift marked an important transition in her farming model. Production was no longer driven only by what could be grown, but increasingly by what could be sold. In effect, Hlophe had begun moving from smallholder production to a more market-oriented agribusiness mindset.



Although she did not enter agriculture with formal training, she benefited from support offered by organisations such as Integrated Rural Development (IRD) and Financial Inclusion and Cluster Development (FINCLUDE).

IRD has helped rural communities through agricultural training, technical support and skills development aimed at improving production practices and supporting farmers to move towards more commercial operations. FINCLUDE, meanwhile, has focused on financial inclusion, helping smallholders improve access to funding, inputs and the business support services needed to scale their enterprises.

Through these interventions, Hlophe strengthened her knowledge in crop husbandry, input management and production planning, improving both efficiency and sustainability within her operation.

Today, she follows a deliberate crop rotation system, alternating between tomatoes, butternut and beetroot to

maintain productivity and ensure a steady flow of produce to market.

"When I harvest tomatoes, I plant butternut, and after butternut I plant beetroot." – Welile Hlophe

The approach supports soil health, spreads production risk and allows her to maintain continuity in supply, a critical factor in building reliable market relationships.

Her persistence and consistency are now yielding measurable results. Hlophe supplied 14.53 tonnes of horticultural produce, including deliveries to NAMBoard, earning her second position in Lubombo. In recognition of her performance, she was also awarded an E3,000 input voucher.

The achievement underscores what is possible when smallholder farmers combine persistence with efficient resource use and stronger alignment to market demand. It also highlights the role that training, technical support and infrastructure investment can play in helping farmers transition from vulnerable production systems

into more commercially oriented enterprises.

Looking ahead, Hlophe plans to expand her production area and continue reinvesting in irrigation infrastructure and inputs to improve productivity. Her advice to fellow farmers is simple, but strategic: secure the market first, then produce for that market.

Her story is a reminder that success in agriculture does not always begin with abundant resources. More often, it begins with resilience, continuous learning and the discipline to build step by step.

In Sigcaweni East, where water remains one of the biggest constraints to farming, Welile Hlophe is demonstrating that with persistence, reinvestment and smarter production systems, smallholder agriculture can evolve into a viable and growing agribusiness.

MARKET-FOCUSED BUTTERNUT FARMING SECURES TOP HONOURS FOR VUVULANE FARMER

BY SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST



First winner in the Lubombo region, Mduzuzi Mashinini a butternut farmer in Vuvulane.

A deliberate focus on high-value crops and market-driven production has earned Vuvulane farmer Mduzuzi Mashinini top honours in Lubombo, after he was crowned the region's best supplier for the second time by the National Agricultural Marketing Board (NAMBoard).

Mashinini claimed first position after supplying 56.08 tonnes of butternut, outperforming other farmers during the final leg of the NAMBoard Farmers Roadshow held at Siphofaneni RDA. His performance once again underscored the growing importance of commercial thinking, crop selection and production efficiency

in shaping success within Eswatini's horticulture sector.

He was followed by Welile Hlophe, who supplied a combined 14.53 tonnes made up of beetroot (300kg), butternut (3,101kg) and tomato (11,130kg), while Mbongeni Goodwill Simelane secured third position with 13.13 tonnes, supplying butternut (12.417kg) and pepper (709kg).

For Mashinini, the result reflects more than output alone. It is the product of a farming model rooted in understanding the market before planting.

"Knowing your market is very important. Once you understand what is needed, you can plan your production properly," Mduzuzi Mashinini

The Vuvulane farmer said his journey began with maize production on a single hectare before he later shifted into horticulture, where he started supplying NAMBoard with support from extension officers. Today, he produces both maize and butternut, but it is his butternut enterprise, grown on two hectares, that has become the main engine of his success.

A major factor behind that performance has been his use of drip irrigation, a system that has helped him maintain consistent production and meet the quality standards required by structured buyers.

For a crop such as butternut, where size, appearance and uniformity influence market acceptance, reliable water management is critical. Drip irrigation delivers water directly to the root zone, providing a steady and controlled supply of moisture that supports proper fruit development and consistent quality.

Unlike more traditional methods, the system reduces water loss through evaporation, limits runoff and improves overall water-use efficiency. It also helps promote more uniform crop growth, reduces disease risk by keeping leaves dry and allows for fertiliser application through irrigation, improving nutrient uptake.

In practical terms, this gives farmers a stronger chance of meeting the expectations of buyers such as NAMBoard, where consistency in both volume and quality matters.

Mashinini's story illustrates how smallholder farmers can move into commercial agriculture by combining the right crop choice with efficient production

systems and a clear market pathway. His repeated success over two consecutive years points not only to strong production capacity, but also to an ability to supply a structured market reliably.

The significance of that shift was echoed by Sydney Dladla, NAMBoard's Head of Agribusiness, who spoke on behalf of CEO Bhekizwe Maziya. Dladla said the Best Performer Awards are designed to encourage farmers to move beyond small-scale production and begin supplying the market on a more commercial basis.

"The purpose of these awards is to motivate farmers to produce at scale. We want farmers to move from small-scale production to supplying the market consistently," Sydney Dladla

He noted that the strongest performers are typically those who understand market requirements and can deliver both volume and consistency, two qualities increasingly central to commercial agriculture.

Dladla also emphasised the importance of farmer registration through the Eswatini Horticulture Information System (EHIS), which enables NAMBoard to track production trends and manage the market more effectively.

"In the case of Mashinini, we know that there is Mashinini in Vuvulane producing butternut because we have that information in our database," Sydney Dladla

He explained that accurate production data allows NAMBoard to make more informed decisions around imports and to prioritise locally produced goods when domestic supply is sufficient. At the same time, such information helps reduce the risk of oversupplying certain crops, a problem that can quickly push prices down and weaken farmer returns.

Farmers were also urged to secure contracts before expanding production, particularly if they intend to farm commercially.

"If you are producing commercially, you need a contract



Outstanding winners at the NAMBOARD farmer's roadshow in Siphofaneni RDA with Head of Agribusiness and Lubombo Extension officer.

whether with NAMBoard or another buyer so that your produce has a guaranteed market," Sydney Dladla

Dladla further encouraged farmers to keep proper records and share data, even when supplying outside NAMBoard, saying this could open the way for broader recognition in future performance awards.

At present, the awards are largely based on deliveries made directly to NAMBoard, but he said there is room to expand recognition to farmers serving other markets, provided the information is credible and verifiable.

"All we need is credible data. It cannot be based on word of mouth. We need records that show what has been produced and sold," Sydney Dladla

The Lubombo results reflect a wider shift taking shape in Eswatini's agriculture sector, where success is increasingly being driven by high-value crop production, stronger market alignment and more efficient farming systems. It is a move away from production based purely on

tradition or habit, and towards a more disciplined model where farmers first identify demand, then scale output to meet it.

For Mashinini, that principle is straightforward: understand the market first, then produce for it.

His performance shows how that approach can translate into real results. As more farmers adopt similar models, the sector stands to unlock stronger productivity, improved market access and higher incomes across the agricultural value chain.

In Vuvulane, Mduzuzi Mashinini is showing that commercial agriculture is not only about growing more. It is about growing with purpose, precision and the market firmly in view.



SIBUSISO MNCINA BUILDS COMMERCIAL SUGAR BEAN MODEL AS ESWATINI RELIES ON IMPORTS

BY: PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

Eswatini continues to rely heavily on imported sugar beans, with industry estimates placing imports at about 90 to 95 percent of national supply. Yet in Motjane, 34-year-old Sibusiso Mncina is working to show that the country can begin narrowing this gap through disciplined commercial production, farmer coordination and stronger market linkages.

A mechanical engineering graduate turned agribusiness operator, Mncina is currently harvesting sugar beans on a two-hectare plot while also managing diversified vegetable production through a cooperative structure involving 41 farmers. His

model reflects a growing shift in Eswatini's agriculture, where young farmers are beginning to move beyond subsistence production into organised, market-driven farming.

Mncina entered agriculture in 2020, starting on a small scale before gradually building a more structured operation. Today, his produce reaches informal markets and formal retail chains, including Freshmark, Pick n Pay, Spar, Indali Supermarket and Easy Buy, as well as NAMBoard-linked marketing channels.

"I was motivated by the import gap. If we are importing up to 95 percent of sugar beans, then locally there is a clear market that can be supplied," he said.

For Mncina, the opportunity in sugar beans is obvious. The crop is widely consumed in Eswatini and remains an important source of protein for many households. However, despite strong domestic demand, local production remains inconsistent, fragmented and unable to meet national requirements at scale. This has left the country dependent on imports mainly from South Africa, Malawi and Tanzania.

His approach is built around treating farming as a business. On his two-hectare sugar bean field, Mncina uses two commercial varieties, PAN 9216 and PAN 148, each selected for a specific purpose. PAN 9216 offers higher yield potential, producing

an estimated 1.5 to two tonnes per hectare under favourable conditions, while PAN 148 provides stronger disease resistance, with yields ranging from about one to 1.5 tonnes per hectare.

"The logic is balanced. PAN 9216 gives us output, PAN 148 gives us stability under disease pressure. You cannot rely on one variety alone," he said.

This balance between yield and resilience is central to his production strategy. Mncina says commercial farming requires farmers to understand not only the market, but also the risks that come with each crop variety. Both sugar bean varieties, he explained, require careful management at maturity because delayed pod opening can affect harvesting time and increase the risk of field losses if the crop is not monitored closely.

His production system also reflects a more technical approach to smallholder farming. Before planting, the land is prepared through herbicide-based weed control, delayed ploughing, primary and secondary tillage, and lime application to correct soil acidity. He applies basal fertiliser using NPK 2:3:4 (40), followed by LAN (28) during the vegetative stage and additional nutrient support during flowering to encourage pod development.

Planting is done using a hand planter system, with spacing of about eight to 10 centimetres between plants, 50 centimetres between rows and a planting depth of approximately three centimetres. According to Mncina, spacing is not a minor detail but a critical part of crop management.

"This spacing is deliberate. It reduces competition, improves airflow, and lowers disease pressure," he said.

The sugar beans are produced under a rain-fed system, taking

advantage of the Highveld rainfall pattern, while his vegetable enterprise is supported through drip irrigation and fertigation. Alongside beans, Mncina produces potatoes, tomatoes, green peppers, spinach, butternuts and strawberries. This diversification gives the farm a more stable income base, allowing him to balance the steady demand for beans with the higher-risk, higher-return nature of vegetable production.

"Beans are stable. Vegetables are high-risk but high-return. Together they balance the farm economy," he said.

Crop rotation is also used to protect soil health and improve fertility, especially through the nitrogen-fixing benefits of legumes such as beans. For Mncina, this is part of building a production system that can remain viable beyond one season.

However, the promise of sugar bean production is still limited by structural weaknesses in the market. Eswatini's sugar bean sector remains fragmented, with limited aggregation capacity, weak grading and standardisation systems, inadequate storage, and a strong reliance on informal trading networks. As a result, local supply often fails to meet buyer requirements consistently, especially during off-season periods when prices rise and imports become the easier option.

Mncina believes cooperative production is one way to respond to these challenges. Through the 41-farmer cooperative model, farmers are able to pool volumes, standardise practices and improve their ability to supply formal markets. He says individual farmers often struggle to meet the volumes and quality standards demanded by supermarkets and institutional buyers, but organised groups have a better chance of entering and staying in those markets.

"When farmers work together, we can meet volumes and standards that

individual farmers cannot achieve," he said.

The Ministry of Agriculture continues to provide extension support, while NAMBoard plays a role in marketing and aggregation. However, Mncina believes more deliberate coordination is needed between farmers, buyers and institutions if Eswatini is to reduce its dependence on imported staples. Without stronger systems for production planning, grading, post-harvest handling and storage, local farmers will continue producing below the country's real demand.

For Eswatini, sugar beans represent both a food security priority and an economic opportunity. Increased local production could reduce foreign exchange outflows, strengthen rural incomes and improve the country's resilience against external supply disruptions. Mncina's model suggests that the issue is not a lack of potential, but the need for better organisation and stronger commercial discipline.

"Farming must be treated as a business. Once that shift happens, everything changes," he said.

As the country looks for ways to strengthen local food systems, farmers like Mncina are showing what a more structured agricultural future could look like. His work in Motjane may be based on two hectares, but it points to a bigger national possibility: that with coordinated farmers, reliable markets and disciplined production systems, Eswatini can begin producing more of the food it currently imports.

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