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Editor's Note

Turning Recovery into Growth

The past few months have tested the country's agricultural sector like few others. From the outbreak of Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) and the suspension of premium beef exports to the nationwide vaccination campaign, the country's resilience has been on full display.

This August edition arrives at a defining moment.

Eswatini has recorded zero active FMD cases after vaccinating more than 453 600 cattle, representing 82% of the national herd. The immediate crisis has been contained. The task now is to rebuild confidence in the livestock industry, restore access to premium export markets and strengthen agriculture as a driver of economic growth.

For beef producers, there is renewed optimism. The government's strategy to reopen exports, starting with cattle from disease-free areas in the Hhohho Region, offers a pathway back to the European Union, while vaccinated cattle could unlock opportunities in Middle Eastern and Gulf markets. Achieving that goal will depend on sustained biosecurity, strong disease surveillance and continued regional cooperation with South Africa, Mozambique and Botswana.

Livestock, however, is only part of the story.

Eswatini continues to import most of the milk consumed locally despite having the potential to produce far more. Expanding dairy production would strengthen food security, create rural jobs and reduce the country's import bill. The same urgency applies to grain production. As the September and October planting season approaches, farmers must prepare to meet demand for maize and beans through better planning, improved seed, mechanisation, soil testing and climate-smart farming.

This month's edition examines how the country is positioning itself for a return to international beef markets, Government's preparations for National Farmers' Day, the implications of NAMBoard's tomato import decision, the country's readiness for GMO adoption, and why safe food is becoming agriculture's new currency.

We also visit farmers in Mahlangatja and Ntfonjeni, assess the sugar industry's E8 billion contribution, and explore opportunities emerging in Eswatini's coffee, leather and industrial-hemp value chains. Our coverage extends to climate-smart agriculture, environmental cooperation projects, farmer training, the SAFFEST 2026 cooking competition, and Taiwan's investment in agricultural skills development.

Beyond the headlines, this edition tells the stories of people building the sector from the ground up. We feature an accountant-turned-farmer, a World Food Programme climate-smart graduate, and entrepreneurs adding value to local agricultural products. Opinion contributions from Mncedisi Simelane and Mcebo Mnisi offer further perspectives on the decisions shaping the future of farming.

Agriculture remains one of the country's greatest economic assets. It feeds the nation, supports rural livelihoods and earns foreign exchange. Its future will be shaped by farmers who embrace innovation, young people who see agriculture as a business and institutions willing to invest in productive enterprises.

The FMD outbreak reminded us how quickly progress can be interrupted. The recovery shows what is possible when farmers, Government, researchers and development partners work together.

As another planting season draws closer, our message is simple: prepare early, produce more and produce better. Every hectare planted, every litre of milk produced and every healthy animal raised brings Eswatini closer to food security, import substitution and stronger participation in international markets.

The opportunity before us is no longer merely to return to normal.

It is to build a stronger, more productive and globally competitive agricultural sector.

Phesheya Kunene
Editor, Agribusiness Media

FMD VICTORY OPENS NEW PATH FOR ESWATINI'S BEEF EXPORTS

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

Eswatini's battle against Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) has entered a new chapter.

With zero active cases now recorded and more than 453 600 cattle, about 82% of the national herd, vaccinated, the country's focus is shifting from disease containment to rebuilding one of its most valuable agricultural industries: beef exports.

The announcement by Minister of Agriculture Hon. Mandla Tshawuka marks the end of months of intensive vaccination, livestock movement controls and heightened surveillance that disrupted cattle marketing and temporarily closed some of Eswatini's most lucrative export opportunities.

More than 783, 000 vaccine doses have been administered since the outbreak began, while the Government has secured additional vaccine stocks to strengthen future emergency preparedness. Authorities are also easing restrictions by converting many veterinary "wet" checkpoints into "dry" inspection points, although disease surveillance will remain in force.

Hhohho's strategic advantage

One of the most significant developments is the Government's export recovery strategy.

Tshawuka says cattle from FMD-free areas that were never vaccinated, particularly in parts of the Hhohho Region, could become the first to regain access to the European Union (EU) market. The EU places a premium on beef from disease-free cattle raised without vaccination under strict animal health standards.

Vaccinated cattle from disease-free areas will not be left behind. The Minister said they are well positioned to access growing markets in the Middle East and Gulf states, where vaccination does not automatically prevent trade provided international animal health requirements are met.

This dual-market strategy could accelerate the recovery of Eswatini's beef industry while the country works towards restoring its internationally recognised FMD-free status.

A regional challenge demands a regional solution

The outbreak has reinforced a lesson increasingly recognised across Southern Africa: animal diseases do not respect national borders.

Eswatini is strengthening collaboration with South Africa, Mozambique and Botswana to improve cross-border surveillance, vaccination programmes, livestock movement controls and veterinary cordon fence management. Regional cooperation has become a priority across the Southern African Development Community (SADC), where governments are pursuing coordinated strategies to limit the spread of transboundary animal diseases and protect agricultural trade.

The need for collaboration is particularly important because wildlife movements, informal livestock trade and shared borders continue to increase the risk of future outbreaks across the region. The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) continue supporting Southern African countries through regional disease-control programmes, surveillance systems and coordinated emergency responses.

The road to recovery

Government has committed E15 million to rehabilitate 26 kilometres of the national veterinary cordon fence, strengthening one of the country's first lines of defence against future outbreaks.

Although active transmission has been halted, the economic recovery is only beginning. Eswatini must still regain its internationally recognised animal health status before premium markets such as the European Union can fully reopen. The country's participation in the EU-SADC Economic Partnership Agreement means restoring animal health status is critical to rebuilding export earnings and confidence across the livestock value chain.

For cattle farmers, processors and exporters, the message is clear: defeating FMD is a major achievement, but protecting that success through regional cooperation, stronger biosecurity and continued vigilance will determine how quickly Eswatini reclaims its place in international beef markets.

ESWATINI PREPARES FOR GMO ADOPTION, CALLS FOR LOCAL SEED PRODUCTION

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

MANZINI — Eswatini is preparing for the possible adoption of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) while stepping up calls for local seed production to strengthen food security, reduce import dependence and build a more climate-resilient agricultural sector.

The dual focus emerged during a series of Regional Biosafety Awareness Workshops organised by the Eswatini Environment Authority (EEA), where agricultural extension officers, researchers and government officials were trained on biosafety, biotechnology and seed regulation.

The workshops, held across the country's four regions, are part of the government's efforts to strengthen the institutional capacity needed before any decisions are taken on the commercial adoption of genetically modified crops.

Speaking during the workshops, EEA officials stressed that Eswatini's approach is guided by science, transparency and precaution.

"Our responsibility is to ensure that biotechnology is introduced, managed and monitored within a robust regulatory framework that

protects both human health and the environment. Capacity building is therefore essential before any biotechnology applications can be effectively implemented," officials told participants.

The Authority said the Biosafety Act is designed to regulate the responsible use of modern biotechnology while safeguarding biodiversity, human health and the environment.

Preparing agriculture for a changing climate

The workshops come at a time when agriculture is facing increasing pressure from climate change, prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall and destructive pests such as the fall armyworm.

Officials said these challenges are forcing countries to explore new technologies capable of improving productivity while reducing production risks.

Globally, biotechnology has largely focused on developing crops with traits such as insect resistance

and herbicide tolerance. Research presented during the workshops showed that genetically modified crops can reduce pesticide use, lower production costs, improve drought tolerance and increase yields when managed responsibly.

However, the EEA emphasised that genetically modified crops are not a one-size-fits-all solution.

During the Lubombo workshop in Siteki, participants were told that a crop variety suited to the cooler conditions of Piggs Peak may not perform in Siteki's hotter and drier climate. As a result, scientific research, environmental assessments and official technical guidance remain essential before any crop variety is recommended for cultivation.

> **"Our responsibility is to ensure that biotechnology is introduced, managed and monitored within a robust regulatory framework that protects both human health and the environment. Capacity building is therefore essential before any biotechnology applications can be effectively implemented"**

The Authority said this is why agricultural extension officers are being equipped with specialised knowledge. Should genetically modified crops eventually be approved, these officers will become the country's frontline biosafety advisers, helping farmers identify approved varieties, comply with biosafety regulations and apply appropriate stewardship practices.

Understanding GMOs

One of the key objectives of the workshops was to address misconceptions surrounding genetically modified organisms.

Addressing participants during the Shiselweni workshop in Nhlangano, EEA Biosafety Registrar Calsile Mhlanga explained that many crops consumed today are already the result of centuries of selective breeding rather than genetic modification.

"Bananas, watermelons and grapes used to be full of seeds, but consumer choices forced farmers to change them through selection," Mhlanga said.

vHe explained that today's larger, sweeter carrots evolved through selective breeding and natural mutations from thin, bitter wild carrots.

Unlike traditional breeding, which selects desirable characteristics over several generations, genetic modification introduces a specific gene, such as one responsible for drought tolerance or insect resistance, directly into a plant's DNA under controlled laboratory conditions.

According to Mhlanga, developing a genetically modified crop typically takes between 10 and 15 years, involving laboratory research, confined field trials, environmental risk assessments and multiple regulatory approvals before commercial release.

He stressed that biotechnology complements rather than replaces good farming practices.

"Farmers must still choose varieties that are suitable for their local climate and soil conditions, follow recommended stewardship practices and comply with biosafety requirements," he said.

He also urged farmers to purchase seed only from authorised suppliers and verify through agricultural extension officers that any genetically modified varieties are officially approved for use in Eswatini.

Local seed production under the spotlight

Beyond biotechnology, the workshops highlighted Eswatini's continued dependence on imported seed, a challenge experts say threatens both food security and farming profitability.

Speaking during the Nhlangano workshop, Sandile Makama, an Agricultural Officer with the Ministry of Agriculture's Seed Quality Control Services based at the Malkerns Research Station, called for greater investment in domestic seed production.

"Let us produce our own seeds. Let us be self-sufficient and stop relying entirely on imports," Makama said.

He warned that geopolitical tensions and disruptions to international supply chains continue to drive up seed prices while limiting the availability of popular seed varieties.

Makama noted that some widely used varieties, including 711, are currently unavailable despite strong demand from farmers.

He proposed that multinational seed companies license local producers to multiply seed within Eswatini, allowing the country to improve availability, strengthen quality assurance and reduce dependence on imported seed.

Makama also cautioned extension officers against misleading seed labelling after reports that some farmers had confused 701 seed with the preferred 711 variety.

"Extension officers must remain vigilant. Farmers depend on your technical guidance to ensure they purchase approved seed varieties. Incorrect labelling and unapproved seed can undermine productivity and create unnecessary confusion," he said.

He added that as biotechnology advances, rigorous scientific research, effective seed certification and continuous biosafety monitoring will become increasingly important in protecting Eswatini's biodiversity and agricultural future.

Balancing innovation with regulation

While biotechnology offers opportunities to improve agricultural

productivity, officials emphasised that any future adoption of genetically modified crops will be governed by strict scientific and regulatory oversight.

Eswatini already has experience in biotechnology regulation through the approval of Bt cotton, which followed years of confined field trials and comprehensive scientific assessment.

Under the Biosafety Act, every GMO application must undergo detailed risk assessment by the National Biosafety Advisory Committee before recommendations are submitted to the Eswatini Environment Authority for consideration.

Officials said the country's regulatory system is designed to ensure that every application protects human health, biodiversity and the environment before any commercial approval is granted.

International organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), maintain that genetically modified foods approved through rigorous scientific assessment are as safe for human consumption as conventional foods. However, they also emphasise that every genetically modified organism must be assessed individually under strong national regulatory systems.

Looking ahead

The Regional Biosafety Awareness Workshops demonstrate that Eswatini's biotechnology agenda extends beyond introducing genetically modified crops.

They are equally about building scientific capacity, strengthening biosafety regulation and developing a more resilient national seed system capable of supporting long-term food security.

For the EEA, the message throughout the workshops was consistent: biotechnology should be guided by science, not speculation.

As climate change continues to reshape agriculture, informed farmers, well-trained extension officers, credible regulation and stronger local seed production will be just as important as technological innovation in securing Eswatini's agricultural future.

The question posed repeatedly during the workshops captures the challenge ahead:

"Do you know whether the seed variety growing on your farm is officially registered and approved for use in Eswatini?"

For a country preparing for the next chapter in agricultural innovation, knowing the answer may be the first step towards sustainable, productive and climate-resilient farming.

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E2.2 BILLION IMPORT BILL OPENS AGRO-PROCESSING OPPORTUNITY FOR ESWATINI FARMERS

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

SITEKI - Eswatini spends about E2.2 billion importing processed food each year. Agriculture Minister Mandla Tshawuka wants more of that money earned at home.

Speaking at the inaugural National Farmers' Day in Siteki, Tshawuka called on farmers, processors and investors to expand local agro-processing, saying increased farm production must be matched by businesses capable of turning local produce into finished products.

He said stronger processing capacity would give farmers dependable markets, reduce produce losses and allow more money to circulate within Eswatini instead of paying for imported processed foods.

The call came at an event that provided a striking picture of what local agriculture can produce. More than 100 farmers showcased enterprises ranging from grains, vegetables and fruit trees to poultry, cattle, pigs, goats, aquaculture and value-added products, while attendance exceeded 500 people.

Many farmers reported strong sales from their exhibition stalls, with some selling out their produce during the day.

E760,000 BACKS FARMING EXCELLENCE

The event also put money and productive assets behind its message.

A total of 88 farmers received prizes valued at about E760,000, comprising E360,000 in cash vouchers and close to E400,000 worth of inputs and farming equipment contributed by sponsors and partners.

Awards ranged from E10,000 to E5,000, E4,000 and E3,000, while farmers also received water tanks, water pipes, fencing materials, fertiliser spreaders, knapsack sprayers, fertiliser, seed, herbicides, poultry chicks, livestock feed and other production inputs.

Among the crop winners, Shiba Bhekumusa took first place in beans, receiving an E10,000 voucher, fertiliser spreader and 5kg of seed, while Bhembe Musa of Sitsatsaweni won the maize category and collected an E10,000 voucher, fertiliser spreader, 10kg of seed and herbicide.

Skhondze Elizabeth of Nceka won Priority Fruits, taking an E10,000 voucher and knapsack sprayer, while Hlophe Welile of Sgcaweni East received an E10,000 voucher and sprayer after topping Priority Conventional Vegetables.

Livestock farmers also featured prominently. Msibi Bongekile won the broiler category, collecting an E10,000 voucher and 300 chicks. Ginindza Busisiwe won layers, Hlanze Petros pigs and Ngcampalala Linda goats, with each taking a top prize of E10,000.

In aquaculture, Dlamini Zwelithini of Siphufeni received an E10,000 voucher, while Tfwala Pholile topped the apiculture category with an E4,000 voucher.

YOUTH AND WOMEN MAKE THEIR MARK

The results also showed the growing presence of women and young people in commercial agriculture.

Wandile Dlamini of Phuzumoya, Siphofaneni, was among the day's standout performers. The young farmer, who keeps cattle, goats, pigs and poultry, finished second in both the pigs and goats categories before being named Outstanding Youth Farmer.

Those awards brought him

E20,000 in vouchers, excluding five additional sponsored vouchers. Dlamini plans to use the support to expand his livestock enterprise and increase cattle numbers for his feedlot operation.

Eli Olivia Khoza Dlamini, an established mixed farmer and recent Lubombo Regional Entrepreneur of the Year overall winner, also added to her growing collection of agricultural honours. She finished second in beans, receiving an E5,000 voucher and 5kg of seed, while also featuring among the livestock winners.

Another notable winner was Fezile Fundile Tembe, co-founder of Sethu Sipho Farm, who received an E3,000 voucher and 5kg of bean seed after placing third in beans. Her enterprise combines dairy, vegetables, grains and other agricultural activities.

Veteran farmer Mary Ntshangase of Maphungwane became one of the crowd favourites, collecting prizes across several crop categories. Her success—and celebrations during the prize presentation—underlined another feature of the results: agricultural enterprise was not confined to one generation.

FROM PRODUCE TO PRODUCTS

For Tshawuka, however, the bigger question is what happens to agricultural production after it leaves the farm.

Eswatini can grow maize, beans, vegetables, fruit, poultry and livestock, but farmers capture less value when these products are sold largely in raw form while processed alternatives are imported.

That is where the E2.2 billion import bill becomes an opportunity.

The Minister urged businesspeople to invest in processing local agricultural produce, arguing that farmers need industries capable of buying consistently, processing at scale and supplying shops and other markets.

Such investment could also provide an outlet for produce that might otherwise be lost when markets are oversupplied or fresh products cannot be sold quickly enough.

Farmers were exposed to that wider value chain during National Farmers' Day through interactions with Ministry departments, buyers, input suppliers, financiers and agricultural organisations. Partners included ESNAU, SAAB, EWADE, SAS, Eswatini Dairy Board, Feedmaster, Farm Chemicals, NMC, NAMBoard, Crane Feeds, Arrow Feeds, IDCE, Umbuluzi Chicken and Siteki Town Council, among others.

Tshawuka also welcomed the strong presence of young farmers and said all producers needed continued support. The inaugural event, which government says will become an annual gathering, was designed not only to reward farmers but also to give them a national platform to market their businesses, learn and build commercial relationships.

The prizes will help individual farmers buy inputs and expand production. The larger prize, however, is the domestic market itself.

If Eswatini can turn more locally produced crops, milk, meat and other farm commodities into products that consumers currently buy from abroad, part of the E2.2 billion leaving the country each year could instead become revenue for local farmers, processors and workers.

FROM BALANCE SHEETS TO BROILERS: THE ACCOUNTANT GROSSING E190,000 A CYCLE

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

Former accountant Nokuthula Simelane grows a small poultry venture into a broiler business generating up to E190,000 per cycle in Malkerns.

MALKERNS — Trading corporate balance sheets for a high-stakes agricultural venture, 38-year-old qualified accountant Nokuthula Precious Simelane has built a thriving poultry operation grossing E190,000 per production cycle.

Operating from a rented commercial facility in the heart of Eswatini's agricultural belt, she currently rears a flock of 3,100 broilers, with plans to double production to 6,000 birds to help satisfy strong local demand.

Walk into the sprawling facility and you are greeted by two things: the symphonic chirping of thousands of healthy broilers, and a blinding, infectious smile.

Simelane is the epitome of the modern African agribusiness pioneer — bubbly, ever-smiling and unapologetically passionate about two things: family, and making cold, hard cash through top-tier farming.

Behind the warm exterior lies the razor-sharp mind of a professional who has swapped boardroom spreadsheets for the relentless data tracking of a commercial poultry shed.

“Farming isn’t a hobby; it’s a numbers game,” Simelane says with a chuckle, her eyes scanning the facility. “If you don’t treat your chicken shed like a corporate balance sheet, the market will liquidate you.”

> **“The initial plan was to stock 4,000 chickens at a different location,” Simelane recalls. “But time was running out, and that facility wasn’t ready. I refuse to let minor setbacks stop me. I quickly pivoted and found this massive facility in Malkerns.”**

From Boardroom to Broilers

Simelane’s journey is a masterclass in calculated risk. Born in the rural Ncabaneni chiefdom, poultry was woven into her childhood. Her parents ran a modest backyard poultry project, teaching her the basic mechanics of animal husbandry. Yet her early career took her down a path of financial reporting and formal employment.

The corporate world, however, could not extinguish her entrepreneurial itch. In 2020, operating as a sole trader, she began rearing small batches of day-old chicks, fattening them and selling to local buyers. But scaling a business requires capital — an asset notoriously difficult for smallholders to secure. Market friction and cash-flow bottlenecks left her early operations plagued by inconsistency.

The turning point came in late 2025, when Simelane approached the Eswatini Agricultural Development Fund (EADF) with a meticulous business plan. By November 2025, she had secured a critical E250,000 capital injection, covering production inputs, equipment and marketing logistics.

“The initial plan was to stock 4,000 chickens at a different location,” Simelane recalls. “But time was running out, and that facility wasn’t ready. I refuse to let minor setbacks stop me. I quickly pivoted and found this massive facility in Malkerns.”

The rented structure has a total capacity of more than 6,000 birds. For now, Simelane is playing it smart, utilising exactly half the facility to protect her margins.

“I started with a production of 3,100 birds, and I am now executing my fourth consistent cycle since receiving the EADF funding,” she says.

Retailing each bird at a competitive E90, the disciplined approach delivers up to E190,000 in gross income per production cycle.

The Macroeconomics of Chicken: Eswatini’s Import Dilemma

Simelane’s expansion comes at a critical juncture for the country. National livestock data estimates domestic chicken consumption at 22,205 tonnes against local broiler production of just 17,104 tonnes.

That deficit means supermarkets and commercial buyers rely heavily on volatile, high-tariff imports, bringing in thousands of tonnes of processed poultry and mechanically deboned meat (MDM) from South Africa each year to bridge the gap.

For data-driven local farmers like Simelane, this import dependence is a goldmine waiting to be tapped under national import-substitution policies. But moving from backyard seller to commercial supplier demands specialised skills: rigorous biosecurity management, precise feed-conversion ratio (FCR) calculations and strict climate control — especially through Eswatini’s unforgiving winters.

“What sets us apart is an absolute refusal to compromise on quality,” Simelane says. “The market can tell when you cut corners on feed or hygiene. High quality is our brand.”

The operation currently runs with one permanent employee, supplemented by casual labourers during peak harvesting periods.

Her birds have already penetrated major commercial markets, supplying Easy Buy Supermarket in Mbabane, forestry giant Montigny, and a network of local butcheries and restaurants. She is finalising supply deals with retail giant OK Foods and exploring a strategic partnership with

Umbuluzi Chicken.

Capital Expenditure and the Mozambican Horizon

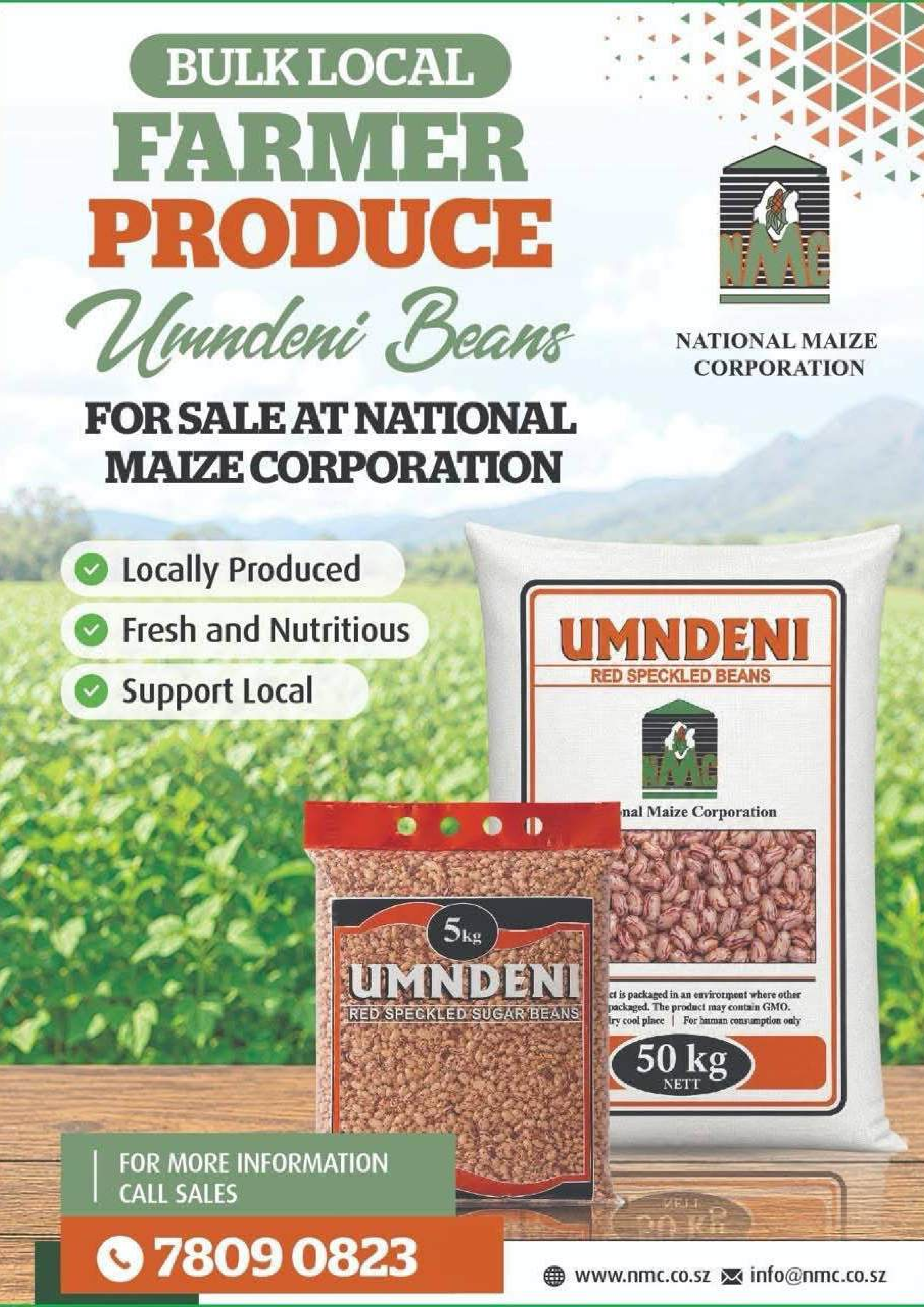
True to her accounting background, Simelane is already plotting her next capital expenditure phase to protect margins. Renting a facility and outsourcing transport, she notes, introduces unnecessary variable costs into her income statement.

"My immediate future plan is to build my own structure and invest in dedicated company transport to slash logistics costs," she explains. "Once the winter season passes and we secure our targeted local volumes, we will fully scale the operation to exploit this facility's full 6,000-bird capacity."

Her vision does not stop at Eswatini's borders. Simelane is conducting market research on the Mozambican export market, where foreign buyers have already expressed keen interest in her poultry. To serve it, she plans to construct a private, state-of-the-art abattoir and processing plant to package and brand her own chicken portions for domestic and international shelves.

As she prepares for her next harvest, the bubbly accountant has a poignant message for young people looking for employment: "Agribusiness is open for business, but it requires discipline. You must be energetic, ready for challenges, and willing to work hard. Never give up."

On the evidence of her current balance sheet, Nokuthula Precious Simelane is not just talking the talk — she is proving that local agriculture rewards those with a sharp commercial eye.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STARKE AYRES LAVUMISA TRIAL SHOWS HOW BETTER SEEDS AND SMARTER FARMING CAN LIFT VEGETABLE PRODUCTION

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

…As Eswatini works to strengthen commercial horticulture and reduce reliance on imported vegetables, the Starke Ayres Lavumisa Trial demonstrated how improved seed genetics, practical agronomy and market-driven production can help farmers produce higher-quality, more profitable crops.

LAVUMISA — Improved seed genetics and better crop management are becoming decisive factors in the profitability of Eswatini's vegetable industry.

That was the central message at the Starke Ayres Farmers' Field Day in Lavumisa, where farmers received practical training on varieties and production practices designed to improve yields, quality and market competitiveness.

Hosted by NAMBoard and Starke Ayres at Thabo Simelane's Kalonjinga Farm, the field trial brought together farmers, extension officers and seed specialists to demonstrate how improved vegetable

varieties perform under Lowveld conditions while sharing practical solutions to production challenges facing commercial growers.

For Eswatini's horticulture sector, where reducing imports and improving local production remain national priorities, the event underscored that profitable farming depends on matching quality seed with sound agronomic practices.

Choose the Right Variety Before You Plant

Founded in 1877, Starke Ayres is one of Africa's leading vegetable seed companies, breeding varieties suited to African climates and commercial production systems.

Its hybrids are recognised for high yields, strong vigour, disease resistance, fruit uniformity and extended shelf life.

Leading the tomato demonstrations, Starke Ayres Sales Representative Gordon Smith urged farmers to view variety selection as a business decision rather than simply choosing seed.

“Resistance helps reduce disease pressure, but it does not replace good farming practices. Regular scouting, crop rotation, field sanitation and preventative crop protection remain essential if farmers want consistent yields,” he said.

Farmers were introduced to tomato hybrids including Amani, STAR 9081, Trinity and Kari, developed for strong yields, improved fruit quality and resistance to key diseases affecting tomato production in Southern Africa.

Key lessons for tomato growers

- Select varieties according to market demand and production season.
- Use healthy seedlings and resistant hybrids.
- Practise crop rotation and maintain strict field hygiene.
- Scout regularly for pests and diseases.
- Follow recommended crop protection programmes.

Healthy Roots Mean Healthy Profits

Pepper specialist Luan Coetzee described root-knot nematodes as one of the biggest hidden threats to pepper production, explaining that damaged roots reduce the plant’s ability to absorb water and nutrients.

“Nematodes attack the roots long before visible symptoms appear. Once the root system is compromised, yields and fruit quality decline,” he said.

Using pepper varieties including Duke, Zia, Tracer and Zinger, Coetzee encouraged farmers to protect crops through healthy soils, balanced fertilisation, irrigation management and integrated pest management.

Pepper farmers should

- Inspect roots when plants begin wilting.
- Rotate crops to reduce nematode pressure.
- Maintain balanced irrigation and soil fertility.
- Scout for pests and diseases throughout the season.
- Seek professional advice before applying pesticides.

Small Mistakes Can Cost Big Money

Vegetable specialists Sandra Bekker and Heinrich Kleyn demonstrated how poor crop establishment can reduce yields before the season even begins.

Kleyn warned farmers against J-root in cabbage seedlings, explaining that bent roots restrict water and nutrient uptake for the life of the crop.

Bekker highlighted the importance of irrigation in hybrid butternut production, noting that during hot weather the mother plant competes with developing fruit for water and nutrients.

"When temperatures rise and irrigation is inadequate, fruit size, quality and profitability are affected," she said.

The specialists also explained how hybrid varieties such as Shiba, Arela, Carla and Cilla should be matched to the appropriate production season and target market.

What farmers should remember

- Plant seedlings correctly to avoid J-root.
- Irrigate consistently during flowering and fruit development.
- Match varieties with seasonal conditions.
- Base fertiliser programmes on soil analysis.
- Protect healthy foliage to maximise fruit development.

Building a More Competitive Horticulture Sector

NAMBoard Marketing and Communications Specialist Lwandile Maseko said the field day forms part of the Board's strategy to strengthen Eswatini's horticulture industry through technology transfer, farmer training and partnerships with seed companies.

"Our objective is to equip farmers with practical knowledge that enables them to select varieties suited to their production goals and market requirements while improving productivity, produce quality and profitability," she said.

According to Maseko, demonstration trials help farmers make informed investment decisions before planting while strengthening collaboration between producers, seed specialists, extension officers and market stakeholders.

She said the partnership between NAMBoard and Starke Ayres is expected to accelerate the adoption of improved seed varieties, improve the consistency and quality of locally produced vegetables, strengthen farmers' competitiveness and contribute to Eswatini's broader drive to reduce vegetable imports while expanding opportunities in formal domestic and regional markets.

The trial is expected to help farmers

- Improve yields and produce quality.
- Reduce production risks.
- Adopt improved seed genetics.
- Meet formal market standards.
- Strengthen competitiveness against imported produce.

Farmers Leave Better Equipped

Host farmer Thabo Simelane said opening his farm for demonstration trials allows growers to compare varieties under local conditions before investing.

"When farmers can see how these varieties perform in our environment, they make better decisions for their businesses," he said.

Participant Msimisi Masuku said the field day reinforced that profitable farming depends on more than selecting quality seed.

"Proper fertilisation, irrigation, pest management and planting techniques all determine whether you make a profit," he said.

The Bigger Picture

The Lavumisa trial showed that successful vegetable farming begins long before harvest. It starts with choosing the right genetics, understanding market requirements and applying sound agronomic practices throughout the production cycle.

For Eswatini's growers, that combination offers more than higher yields. It provides a pathway to producing better-quality vegetables, reducing production losses, improving profitability and building a more competitive and resilient horticulture industry.

As the country works towards reducing reliance on imported vegetables and strengthening local value chains, partnerships such as that between NAMBoard and Starke Ayres are equipping farmers with the knowledge, technologies and confidence needed to compete in an increasingly demanding agricultural marketplace.

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MAHLANGATSHA GRAIN FARMERS SHOW HOW HIGHER YIELDS CAN CUT MAIZE IMPORTS

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

MAHLANGATSHA — Commercial grain farmers in Mahlangatsha are demonstrating that higher yields, improved farming practices and stronger extension support can significantly reduce maize imports and strengthen the country's food security.

During a Ministry of Agriculture tour led by Acting Director Nikiwe Dlamini, officials visited several commercial farmers whose rising maize and bean production is showing how better agronomy, modern technologies and farmer collaboration can help close the gap between local grain supply and national demand.

For decades, the country has relied heavily on imported maize and beans to meet domestic demand. Yet the fertile soils of Mahlangatsha and the success of its commercial farmers suggest that increasing local production is achievable through better farming practices, improved technology and stronger extension services.

The country requires roughly 140,000 tonnes of maize annually, yet local production frequently falls well below demand, forcing significant imports, particularly during drought years. Dry bean production has also improved through government support programmes, but domestic supply still falls short of demand, presenting opportunities for expansion by commercial producers.

The experience of Mahlangatsha shows that the solution is not only increasing the number of farmers, but increasing production per hectare through better agronomic practices.

Commercial farmer Nathi Mabuza, who now harvests more than 350 tonnes of maize each season from his farms in Mahlangatsha and Lubombo, challenged young people to venture into commercial farming, saying agriculture has the potential to create sustainable livelihoods while strengthening national food security. He encouraged aspiring farmers to seek technical support from the Ministry of Agriculture and continually expand their production.

Farmer Elijah Simelane also credits modern farming practices for transforming his enterprise. After returning home in 2019 to focus on farming full-time, he worked closely with Assistant Extension Officer Nhlanhla Stew Steenkamp, adopting improved planting methods, fertiliser programmes and crop management techniques. Production increased to the extent that he expanded his maize storage facilities and now plans to increase both maize and bean production.

Other farmers are recording similar progress. Musa Lushaba increased his maize harvest from about 30 tonnes to 40 tonnes on the same eight hectares through improved crop management, while Jabu Ngwenya-Tsabedze has developed a successful maize and bean enterprise that supplies both the National Maize Corporation (NMC) and NAMBoard, creating seasonal employment in the process.

Women are equally contributing to the sector's growth. Make Maseko cultivates seven hectares of maize while operating poultry and piggery enterprises. She believes diversification strengthens farm resilience and has encouraged farmers to join the newly established Mahlangatsha Grain Association, which aims to improve access to farming knowledge, discounted inputs and new markets.

Association chairperson Mbongeni Vilakati says organised farmers are better positioned to access opportunities, exchange knowledge and collectively improve grain production.

A key factor behind Mahlangatsha's progress is the technical guidance provided by Ministry of Agriculture extension officers. Assistant Extension Officer Nhlanhla Stew Steenkamp continues to encourage farmers to begin every season with soil sampling, apply lime where necessary to correct soil acidity, plant improved seed varieties such as SC719, SC727, SC637, Lake 601, Capstone and Dekalb, and follow recommended fertiliser programmes, weed management and timely control of fall armyworm.

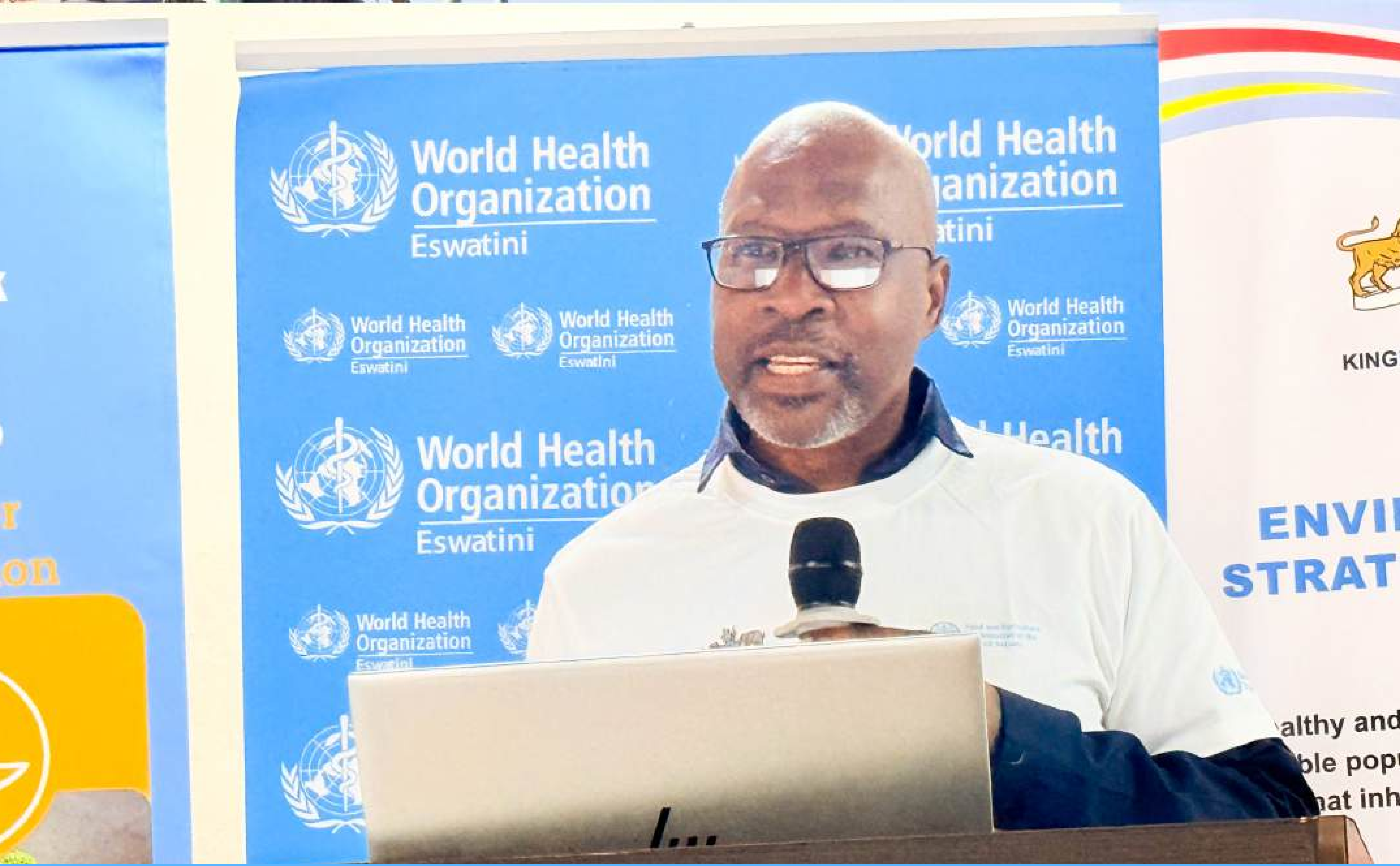
These practices are becoming increasingly important as farmers face rising temperatures, prolonged heatwaves and erratic rainfall associated with climate change.

While many producers experienced lower yields this season, those who adopted recommended production methods still achieved encouraging harvests.

The lessons from Mahlangatsha extend beyond one farming community. They demonstrate that increasing maize and bean production will require continuous investment in farmer training, stronger extension services, improved access to quality inputs, organised farmer associations and greater participation by young people in commercial agriculture.

If these approaches are replicated across the country's grain-producing regions, local production could steadily close the gap between supply and demand, reduce dependence on imports and create new opportunities for value addition, regional trade and future exports.

Mahlangatsha's farmers are proving that higher yields are not simply the result of cultivating more land—they are the product of knowledge, innovation, discipline and a commitment to treating farming as a business.



SAFE FOOD BECOMES NEW AGRICULTURAL CURRENCY AS GOVT TARGET 200 FOODBORNE ILLNESSES

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

EZULWINI - Eswatini's food safety debate has moved from the kitchen table to the centre of agricultural policy, public health and trade.

That was the central message on 3 July 2026, when Government, FAO, WHO, farmers, food producers, retailers and health officials gathered at SibaneSami Hotel for the World Food Safety Day commemoration held under the theme "From burden to solutions: safe food everywhere." For an agrarian country where agriculture supports the livelihoods of about 75 percent of rural families, food safety is no longer a small technical matter. It is a national economic issue. It determines whether farmers access markets, whether consumers are protected, whether food businesses survive, and whether Eswatini can compete in regional and international trade.

Representing the Minister of Health, Dr Velephi Okello Nhlengetfwa said unsafe food remains a major public health challenge, causing more than 200 types of illnesses and placing pressure on families, communities, health systems and the economy.

"These are not just statistics; they represent lives disrupted, families affected and communities weakened," she said.

Dr Okello said Eswatini must use food safety data to design practical solutions. She said evidence must guide surveillance, prevention, laboratory systems, regulation and public education, because safe food is not only a health issue but also a driver of economic growth, trade, tourism and sustainable development.

Her message was clear: data must not sleep in reports while unsafe food reaches the plate.

“Safe food begins long before it reaches the consumer’s plate; it starts on the farm,” she said.

From the agricultural side, Dr Bongekile Ndwandwe, Food Safety Officer in the Ministry of Agriculture’s Department of Agricultural Research and Specialist Services, said the farm remains the first battlefield in the fight for safe food.

“Safe food begins long before it reaches the consumer’s plate; it starts on the farm,” she said.

She urged farmers to adopt Good Agricultural Practices, use veterinary medicines responsibly, apply pesticides according to recommended guidelines, maintain hygiene and strengthen disease control. She warned that misuse of antibiotics in livestock can fuel antimicrobial resistance, while careless pesticide use can leave harmful residues on crops and damage the environment.

This is where the issue becomes urgent for farmers. Food safety begins with land selection, safe fertilisers, approved pesticides, clean irrigation water, healthy animals and proper handling after harvest. A farmer can produce a beautiful crop and still lose the market if that crop carries chemical residues, harmful bacteria or mould.

FAO Senior Programme Officer Sibusiso Mondlane warned that contamination can enter the food chain quietly through unsafe water, poor storage, poor handling and unapproved agrochemicals. He singled out legumes such as beans and groundnuts, saying they require careful handling because mould can expose consumers to dangerous contaminants such as aflatoxins.

“If it is not safe, it is not food,” Mondlane said.

That warning carries weight in a country already battling climate shocks, including drought conditions that can reduce harvests and increase dependence on imports. With about 304,000 people facing acute food insecurity, Eswatini cannot afford to lose food through contamination, poor storage or preventable post-harvest damage.

About 30 percent of food produced in the country is estimated to be lost after harvest because of weaknesses in handling, storage and transport. In practical terms, this means farmers may be losing income not only in the field, but also in the shed, the truck, the warehouse and the market stall.

Mondlane said food safety must also continue beyond the farm gate. Processors and manufacturers must apply Good Manufacturing Practices and Good Hygienic Practices from the receipt of raw materials to processing, storage, transport, marketing and final delivery to consumers.

Steven Khumalo, Principal Environmental Health Officer, also stressed that safe fertilisers, approved pesticides and clean irrigation water are not small details. They are the first shield against contamination. He said every player in the food value chain, from farmers and processors to manufacturers, vendors and consumers, must take responsibility.

The African picture is sobering. Contaminated food causes an estimated 91 million illnesses and 137,000 deaths across the continent every year. Globally, unsafe food costs about US$310 billion annually through lost productivity and health-care costs. These are not distant figures. They show how unsafe food can quietly eat into national prosperity.

For Eswatini, the trade implications are just as serious. Unsafe produce can be rejected at borders, damage farmer confidence

and weaken the country's competitiveness in formal markets. Safe production, on the other hand, can open doors for farmers supplying retailers, processors, schools, hotels, export markets and regional buyers.

FAO Assistant Representative Howard Mbuyisa said work is underway to strengthen the country's food safety governance by reviewing outdated laws covering public health, veterinary public health and agriculture.

"We are reviewing legacy legislation spanning public health, veterinary public health and agricultural acts to eliminate regulatory overlaps, clarify institutional responsibilities and create a seamless, unified food safety command," he said.

This speaks directly to the One Health approach, which links the health of people, animals, plants and the environment. A sick animal, contaminated crop, polluted water source or poorly stored harvest is not only a farming problem. It can become a public health problem, a trade problem and an economic problem.

The commemoration made one lesson plain: food safety is now part of agricultural competitiveness. Farmers who use clean water, approved inputs, proper storage and safe handling are not merely complying with rules. They are protecting their businesses.

In the new food economy, safe food is currency. It buys consumer trust, market access, public health

and national credibility.

From the soil to the shelf, Eswatini's food chain is only as strong as its weakest practice. The challenge now is to make safe food not a slogan for commemorations, but a daily discipline in every field, kraal, packhouse, factory, market and ho

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MELANE LEATHER PUTS ESWATINI'S LEATHER INDUSTRY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

Eswatini's leather industry is emerging as one of the country's most promising value-addition sectors, and the rise of Melane Leather Eswatini demonstrates how locally processed livestock products can create jobs, unlock export markets and generate far greater value than raw hides.

That transformation has earned the company's founder, Dumsile Nobuhle Simelane, the title of 2026 Hhohho Regional Entrepreneur of the Year. Her business has grown into one of the Kingdom's leading manufacturers of premium handcrafted leather products, supplying corporate, retail and international markets while showcasing the commercial potential of processing local raw materials into high-value goods.

The recognition extends beyond one enterprise. It signals the growing importance of leather manufacturing within Eswatini's livestock value chain, particularly as the country rebuilds momentum following the successful containment of the Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak. For policymakers, investors and entrepreneurs, Melane Leather offers a practical example of how value addition can strengthen industrialisation, expand exports and create sustainable employment.

Turning Hides into Higher-Value Products

For decades, cattle have been among Eswatini's most valuable agricultural assets, yet much of the industry's economic return has come from beef production while hides received limited local processing.

Melane Leather is helping change that equation.

Operating from Lobamba eMashibhini, the company converts locally sourced cattle hides into premium laptop bags, handbags, wallets, belts, corporate gifts and customised leather accessories. Its products have reached customers in Taiwan, Malaysia, Mauritius and the United Arab Emirates, demonstrating that products manufactured in Eswatini can compete in demanding international markets.

A Strategic Opportunity for Eswatini

The leather industry is a vital component of Africa's manufacturing economy. South Africa, Eswatini's largest trading partner, has an established leather value chain supplying the automotive, footwear, furniture and fashion industries while exporting finished leather products worldwide.

For Eswatini, the opportunity lies in capturing more value from its own livestock resources. Instead of exporting raw hides, local processing can stimulate manufacturing, support small and medium enterprises, create skilled employment and increase export earnings. With access to the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) market and rising global demand for authentic handcrafted products, the country is well positioned to grow a competitive leather industry.

Built Through Entrepreneurship

Founded in 2016, Melane Leather began with just three leather-working machines. Today, it operates a fully equipped workshop, a retail outlet at Swazi Candles Craft Centre, and exports premium leather products to regional and international markets.

The company's growth has been supported by institutions including SEDCO, Taiwan ICDF, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Trade, and the Eswatini Investment Promotion Authority (EIPA), which have helped strengthen its production

capacity, quality standards and export readiness.

The latest accolade adds to an impressive record that includes the 2017 Hhohho Regional Entrepreneur of the Year award and the 2023 National Outstanding Handicraft Business Award, reflecting years of consistent business development and innovation.

Beyond One Business

Melane Leather's success reflects a broader shift taking place across Eswatini's economy. Recent Entrepreneurship of the Year Awards have increasingly recognised businesses built on agriculture and value addition, highlighting the country's growing focus on transforming local resources into competitive enterprises.

For the livestock sector, the message is clear. Every processed hide represents greater economic value than an unprocessed one. Every finished leather product creates additional opportunities for manufacturing, exports and employment.

As Eswatini continues pursuing industrialisation and export-led growth, businesses such as Melane Leather demonstrate that the country's competitive advantage will increasingly depend not only on producing agricultural commodities, but on transforming them into world-class products. In doing so, they are helping position Eswatini's leather industry as an emerging contributor to economic diversification, manufacturing growth and sustainable economic development.

From Soil to Shelf: Market-Ready Traditional African Vegetables Varieties

By Mcebo Emmanuel Mnisi

Eswatini's vegetable sector is standing at a crossroads. With national demand at 41.5 million kilograms per year and a staggering **82% deficit**, the opportunity for Traditional African Vegetables (TAVs) has never been clearer. What was once dismissed as "wild food" is now the most commercially viable frontier for farmers, traders, and investors alike.

The question for August is no longer *whether* TAVs can close the gap, but *which crops and varieties* will lead the charge.

The Big Three: Crops Driving the Market

- **Pumpkin Leaves (Tintsanga):** With an informal sector value exceeding **E46.7 million** and a formal sector demand of **E8 million** across Eswatini's 15 primary towns, pumpkin leaves are the undisputed heavyweight. Their organic appeal, especially when grown with vermicompost, aligns perfectly with consumer demand for nutrient-rich, chemical-free produce.
- **Amaranth (Imbuya):** Formal demand sits at **134, 000 kg annually**, valued at **E4.0 million**. High-yielding commercial varieties such as **Nguruma** and **Madiira 1** are already proving their worth in

structured retail channels, offering consistent supply and superior nutritional profiles.

- **Okra (Mandwandwe):** Though smaller in scale (20, 000 kg, worth **E2.3 million** in market value), okra is a premium niche crop. Its profitability hinges on disciplined harvesting—pods must be picked every 2–3 days at 8–10 cm length to meet supermarket standards.

Varieties the Market Wants

- **Amaranth**: Nguruma and Madiira 1 — High-yielding, multi-cut selections preferred by formal retail buyers for their rapid leaf recovery, high biomass, and delayed flowering.

  Amaranth (Imbuya) – Variety, Nguruma

- **Pumpkin Leaves**: High-vigor selections grown under vermicompost-fed regimes that produce wider leaf surface areas and extended harvest windows.

  Pumpkin leaves (Umbidvo wetintsanga)

- **Okra**: Uniform, smooth pod-producing cultivars that deliver consistent sizing—critical for supermarket tray-packing and export compliance.

These varieties are not just agronomic choices; they are **market signals**. Farmers who align production with buyer preferences stand to capture premium margins.

Beyond Fresh Produce: Value Addition

The Achilles' heel of TAVs remains post-harvest loss, with up to **50% of fresh yields wasted**. The solution lies in **value addition**:

- Solar drying and milling transform surplus leaves into powders (Imbuya, Ligusha), extending shelf life to over six months.
- These products open doors to **urban supermarkets and export channels**, stabilizing farmer incomes and reducing waste.

The Verdict

Traditional African Vegetables are no longer "food for the pot." They are **green gold for the pocket**. By focusing on priority crops, adopting market-preferred varieties, and integrating value addition, Eswatini's farmers can reclaim the domestic market and position themselves for regional trade.

The August narrative is clear: **the market is waiting, the varieties are known, and the time to grow for profit is now.**

ESWATINI COFFEE BUILDS SHADE-GROWN VALUE CHAIN AS 130 FARMERS CHASE RISING DEMAND

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

NGCULWINI — Eswatini Coffee is building a climate-smart coffee value chain that links smallholder farmers, university researchers, local processing and regional buyers in an effort to turn coffee into a serious commercial crop for the country.

Founded by Patrick Dupont in 2017, the enterprise promotes shade-grown coffee farming, where coffee is planted under indigenous and fruit trees instead of clearing natural vegetation. The model supports soil protection, moisture retention, food production and income diversification.

At its Ngculwini demonstration farm and larger Lwandle site, Eswatini Coffee is showing farmers how coffee can move from nursery to field, wet mill, drying racks, grading table, roasting machine and finally the cup.

The Ngculwini nursery plays a central role in the model. Eswatini Coffee nurtures coffee seedlings before supplying them to growers across the country, ensuring farmers receive healthy, vigorous planting material capable of producing quality coffee.

Dupont said patience in the nursery is one of the most overlooked ingredients of successful coffee farming.

"The longer the tree develops properly in the nursery, the quicker it establishes once planted," he said.

He explained that allowing seedlings to mature before transplanting enables them to produce cherries sooner than plants moved into the field prematurely.

Dupont said coffee must be treated as a commodity with a complete value chain, not merely as another crop.

"Coffee is not about coffee only,"

he said. "It is about farming, food sovereignty, organic production and commercial agriculture. Every farmer must make every hectare work harder."

The Ngculwini farm, covering about one hectare, serves as a practical training centre for farmers, students and development partners. The larger Lwandle farm, spanning about 4.2 hectares, follows the same climate-smart production model while demonstrating commercial-scale coffee farming.

Today, Eswatini Coffee works with more than 130 smallholder farmers in over 128 communities, including Lwandle, Jubukweni and Maliyaduma. Growers receive seedlings, technical support and continuous training before selling their coffee cherries back to Eswatini Coffee for processing, roasting and marketing.

Demand is already running ahead of production.

A Mozambican buyer has submitted a Letter of Intent to purchase 20 tonnes of Green Arabica coffee beans, adding to growing regional interest generated through exhibitions and trade partnerships in Kenya, South Africa and other African markets.

"The challenge is that demand is growing faster than production," Dupont said. "We need more farmers, more coffee trees and greater volumes of high-quality coffee."

Supported by partners including the European Union, the International Trade Centre (ITC), the Eswatini Investment Promotion Authority (EIPA) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Eswatini Coffee is positioning the country as a producer of premium, shade-grown Arabica coffee rather than competing with the world's largest coffee-producing nations on volume.

His strongest message to farmers, however, is about protecting the environment.

"Do not destroy natural forests," Dupont said. "Remove invasive plants, but do not cut down indigenous trees. They protect the coffee."

Shade trees regulate temperature, retain soil moisture and reduce erosion, while intercropping with bananas, mangoes, avocados, papayas and vegetables enables farmers to harvest food and earn income as their coffee trees mature.

He also encourages growers to use coffee plants as living hedges around homesteads and fields.

"Your hedge must also bring something home," he said.

Coffee demands patience. Seedlings can remain in the nursery for up to two years before planting, but that investment in time shortens the period to first production once they are established in the field. Well-managed trees begin producing commercially after about three years and can remain productive for decades.

At Ngculwini, visitors are taken through every stage of the cherry-to-cup process—from nursery management and shaded field production to wet milling, natural processing, drying, grading, moisture testing, roasting and brewing.

Junior Dupont demonstrated how green coffee is tested for moisture before being roasted into light, medium and dark profiles, while barista Luyandza Zwane showcased the final stages of grinding and brewing that complete the value chain.

The enterprise is also strengthening its partnership with the University of Eswatini's Luyengo Campus through the ARISE Project, linking practical farming with biotechnology, greenhouse research and student training to improve coffee production and farmer support.

For Eswatini's farmers, the message is clear: coffee is not a quick-return crop, but it is a long-term investment capable of generating income while protecting the environment, improving food security and creating opportunities throughout the value chain.

The market already exists. The challenge now is producing enough coffee to supply it.

LOCAL FARM PRODUCE PROVES ITS COMMERCIAL VALUE AT SAFFEST 2026

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

MANZINI – SAFFEST 2026 delivered a powerful message to farmers and agribusinesses: local produce has the quality, consistency and market potential to compete in Africa's premium food industry.

The four-day Southern African Food Festival, held at the Mavuso Trade Centre, brought together chefs from 11 African countries, who prepared award-winning dishes using locally produced fish, indigenous vegetables, fresh produce, beans and premium beef and pork supplied by Embiveni Meats.

The festival demonstrated how agriculture, food processing and hospitality can work together to create value across the food chain, from the farm to the dining table.

A major highlight was the use of Traditional African Vegetables (TAVs) supplied through the

Traditional African Vegetables Initiative (TAVI). Crops such as amaranth, jute mallow (ligusha), African nightshade (umsobo), pumpkin leaves and cowpea leaves were transformed into modern, restaurant-quality dishes by chefs from across the region.

Long regarded as subsistence crops, these vegetables are now gaining recognition as climate-smart, nutrient-rich commodities with growing demand in supermarkets, hotels and restaurants. Through farmer training, improved seed systems, nutrition education and value addition, TAVI is helping unlock new markets while improving food security and rural incomes.

Eswatini's expanding aquaculture sector also featured prominently. Chef Sive Bhembe showcased locally farmed tilapia, demonstrating professional filleting techniques before pairing the fish with indigenous vegetables.

The tilapia was sourced from a local farm supported by the Eswatini Aquaculture Project Phase II, a partnership between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Taiwan Technical Mission. The project is promoting commercial fish farming through cage culture while expanding the production of species such as tilapia,

catfish and bass to reduce imports and strengthen local fish production.

The livestock industry was equally well represented through Embiveni Meats, whose locally processed premium beef and pork were used throughout the competition. The quality of the products received praise from visiting chefs, highlighting the importance of local processing in creating value for livestock producers and supplying the hospitality industry with premium products.

Beans and other locally grown crops also featured in several dishes, reinforcing the importance of diversified farming systems that improve nutrition while creating multiple income opportunities for producers.

Beyond the competition, SAFFEST 2026 demonstrated that the future of African cuisine depends on strong agricultural value chains. Farmers produce the raw materials, processors add value, chefs create demand and consumers reward quality.

For Eswatini's agricultural sector, the festival offered an important lesson: indigenous vegetables, aquaculture, livestock and other locally produced foods are no longer simply commodities, they are premium products capable of driving agribusiness growth, creating jobs and positioning local farmers to compete in regional food markets.

NAMBOARD REOPENS TOMATO IMPORTS AFTER FROST HITS LOCAL SUPPLY

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

Manzini - In May, tomato farmers were being warned against planting too much. By July, Eswatini was preparing to import tomatoes again.

The abrupt reversal captures the vulnerability of the country's horticulture market, where a seemingly comfortable surplus can be erased within weeks by falling temperatures, reduced planting and one damaging frost.

Data published through the Eswatini Horticulture Information System, or EHIS, had shown tomato production exceeding projected national demand for three consecutive months. NAMBoard's May Area Planted report consequently advised farmers to exercise restraint. Only growers operating under confirmed production programmes were encouraged to plant, and even they were told to proceed cautiously.

At the time, oversupply appeared to be the greater threat. Six weeks later, the National Agricultural Marketing Board revised its temporary restriction on tomato imports after local supplies fell below market demand.

Under a Trade Restriction Notice issued in terms of the NAMBoard Act No. 13 of 1985, importers were permitted to bring in round and gem table tomatoes from 22 July 2026. Cherry tomatoes were excluded from the arrangement.

The permission, however, came with an important condition: importers must prove that at least 25 per cent of the volume they intend to import has first been sourced from locally registered tomato farmers.

The decision raises an obvious question. How did a market believed to be heading towards a glut in May find itself short of tomatoes by July? The answer lies in the speed with which weather and production decisions can rewrite agricultural forecasts.

Frost removes the market cushion

NAMBoard attributed the shortage to frost damage affecting much of the tomato crop standing in farmers' fields. The frost was the immediate trigger, but planting data suggest that the market had already begun tightening before the cold weather struck.

According to the June Area Planted report, tomato plantings declined sharply from 9.51 hectares in May to 3.51 hectares in June. The June figure was well below the estimated 6.34 hectares required each month to satisfy local demand.

The contraction was not limited to tomatoes. Total recorded vegetable plantings fell from 44.27 hectares in April to 15.24 hectares in June, against estimated combined monthly demand of 83.63 hectares.

Winter had discouraged farmers from putting crops into the ground. Lower temperatures slowed production, increased the risk of frost and reduced the confidence of growers who had already been warned about possible oversupply.

The tomato market was therefore relying heavily on crops planted during April and May. These were the same plantings that had prompted fears of a glut. When frost damaged that standing crop, the country's supply cushion disappeared. Within days, a projected surplus became a shortage.

The episode demonstrates one of the limits of agricultural forecasting. Planting data can show how much produce is likely to reach the market, but it cannot guarantee that the crop will survive long enough to be harvested.

Imports opened under strict conditions

NAMBoard's decision does not amount to the complete liberalisation of tomato imports. It is a controlled intervention intended to close the supply gap without displacing farmers whose crops survived the frost.

The 25 per cent local purchasing requirement is the central safeguard. Before an importer can bring tomatoes across the border, the business must demonstrate that a quarter of the intended import volume has been purchased from farmers registered with NAMBoard. This creates a market for available local produce while allowing traders to supplement the balance through imports. It also places registered farmers first in line for the demand created by the shortage.

For growers holding marketable tomatoes, the change may offer stronger sales opportunities. NAMBoard's buying prices published on EHIS for the week of July 19 to 25 listed ordinary tomatoes at E8.00 per kilogramme and tunnel-grown tomatoes at E11.00 per kilogramme.

The E3.00 premium for tunnel tomatoes reflects the greater consistency and protection that controlled production systems can provide, particularly during winter. NAMBoard has indicated that the revised arrangement is temporary. Tomato availability will continue to be monitored, and the import conditions may be adjusted as local supply recovers.

Data did not fail

The rapid shift from surplus warnings to import approvals could easily be interpreted as evidence of poor planning. A closer reading suggests otherwise.

The May data accurately reflected the market conditions at the time. Plantings were running ahead of projected demand, creating a genuine risk of excessive supply and depressed farm-gate prices.

The June data then showed a different market emerging. Plantings had fallen below demand, indicating that the supply pipeline was narrowing. Farmers and traders who followed the monthly reports closely could have seen the market beginning to tighten even before the frost damage was fully assessed.

The Area Planted reports are therefore becoming more than a record of what farmers have put into the ground. They are developing into an early-warning system capable of showing where future shortages and surpluses may emerge. Their effectiveness, however, will depend on the quality of information farmers provide. Incomplete planting records can distort the national picture and weaken the usefulness of market guidance.

Climate risk changes the calculation

The tomato shortage also exposes the growing cost of climate risk in Eswatini's horticulture industry. Farmers are frequently advised to plant according to market demand. Yet market discipline alone cannot protect crops from frost, heatwaves, hailstorms or prolonged rainfall.

A grower may make the correct planting decision and still lose the crop before harvest. The case for protected cultivation is therefore becoming stronger. Tunnels, greenhouses, frost covers and improved irrigation systems require substantial investment, but they can reduce exposure to sudden weather changes and allow farmers to supply the market more consistently.

The higher price offered for tunnel tomatoes suggests that the market already recognises this value. For a smallholder, a production tunnel may appear expensive. During a severe frost, however, it can be the difference between participating in a high-priced market and having no crop to sell.

Registration brings commercial advantages

The revised import arrangement also demonstrates the economic value of

formal registration. Only tomatoes bought from farmers registered with NAMBoard count towards the compulsory 25 per cent local sourcing requirement. Unregistered growers may have surviving produce, but they are not automatically included in the structured procurement system created by the import concession.

Registration is often treated as an administrative obligation. In this case, it has become a direct route to market. Farmers who register their operations, report their planted areas and participate in recognised production programmes are easier for NAMBoard and importers to identify when shortages occur. Those outside the system risk being overlooked, even when they have produce available.

A cautious road towards spring

Eswatini's underlying tomato demand has not changed. The market still requires the equivalent of about 6.34 hectares of new production every month. June plantings reached only 3.51 hectares. Until production improves and spring crops begin reaching the market, imports are likely to remain necessary.

Farmers must nevertheless avoid reacting to the shortage by planting blindly. Tomato production responds slowly, while prices and market conditions can change quickly.

Late-May crops that survived the frost may still enter the market alongside June and July plantings. A rush into production could therefore recreate the oversupply that NAMBoard warned about earlier in the season.

The lesson from this winter is not that farmers should ignore market guidance. It is that they must combine planting data with weather risk, production timing and confirmed access to buyers. In May, the danger was too many tomatoes. By July, the problem was too few. Between those two positions stood a shrinking planting pipeline, a damaging frost and a market whose balance can change faster than a crop can grow.

SIMUNYE BEVERAGES

PROUDLY CRAFTED IN ESWATINI

SPOTTED HORSE

EXPLORERS
CRAFT SPIRITS

GOVT VOWS TO REMOVE FARMERS' BARRIERS, TARGETS HHOHHO TO BOOST MILK PRODUCTION

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

NTFONJENI – Government has pledged to remove barriers limiting agricultural productivity while positioning the Hhohho Region to become Eswatini's leading milk-producing area, as part of a broader drive to strengthen food security, reduce imports and expand commercial agriculture.

Speaking during the Ministry of Agriculture's Farming with Communities programme at Ntfonjeni Inkhundla, Minister of Agriculture Mandla Tshawuka said government is committed to bringing

agricultural services closer to farmers while unlocking the region's potential in dairy production.

He said Hhohho's favourable climate, abundant grazing land and strong livestock farming tradition make it well placed to increase milk production, improve household incomes and create opportunities for export-driven growth.

"Hhohho has the potential to become the country's leading milk-producing region. Our goal is to help farmers produce more, earn more and contribute to national food security,"

Tshawuka said.
The Minister also addressed one of the biggest concerns raised by farmers—the cost and delays of travelling to Malkerns Research Station for soil testing, a requirement for accessing government farming input subsidies.

He acknowledged that the Ministry currently relies on one fully functional soil testing laboratory at Malkerns, resulting in delays and additional costs for farmers across the country.

To address the challenge, Tshawuka announced plans to restore satellite soil testing stations across the country, bringing services closer to farming communities, reducing travel costs and ensuring farmers receive soil analysis results before the planting season begins.

"We want government services to reach farmers instead of farmers travelling long distances to access them," he said.

The engagement also brought together key agricultural institutions, including the National Maize Corporation (NMC), NAMBoard, Eswatini Agricultural Development Fund (EADF), Eswatini Dairy Board and Lake Agriculture, giving farmers direct access to information on financing, mechanisation, production, markets and value addition.

During the discussions, NMC Executive Manager for Farmer Development and Mechanisation Simangaliso Sihlongonyane urged farmers to prepare for the upcoming cropping season, announcing that applications for ploughing subsidies will open in August, while tractor services will begin in September. He encouraged farmers to apply and pay early to secure mechanisation services, noting that Ntfonjeni RDA currently has about 15 tractors, including outsourced units, and expressing a vision for every Rural Development Area to eventually have at least 40 tractors.

Meanwhile, NAMBoard Chief Operations Officer and Head of Agribusiness Sydney Dladla responded to farmers' concerns over fluctuating produce prices, explaining that prices are determined by market demand and supply, not by NAMBoard. He urged farmers to diversify production, grow crops throughout the year and avoid flooding the market with the same commodities during a single season.

Ministry of Agriculture extension officer Ntokozo Dlamini also encouraged farmers to apply agricultural lime (litfunyela) now, describing the current period as the ideal time to improve soil fertility before land preparation begins. He advised farmers to work closely with extension officers on proper application rates before incorporating the lime into the soil through tillage.

The Farming with Communities programme forms part of government's strategy to strengthen collaboration with farming communities by listening to farmers' concerns, providing practical solutions and improving access to agricultural services. The initiative also creates a platform for farmers to engage directly with policymakers, showcase their enterprises and build partnerships that support increased agricultural production and commercialisation.

With government committing to improve service delivery while encouraging greater investment in livestock and crop production, the Ntfonjeni engagement reinforced a clear message: removing barriers for farmers is central to achieving a more productive, competitive and food-secure agricultural sector.

WFF CLIMATE-SMART GRADUATE TURNS UNEMPLOYMENT INTO 4-HECTARE VEGETABLE ENTERPRISE

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

HLANE—When Notsile Dlamini graduated with a qualification in Agricultural Extension from the University of Eswatini's Luyengo Campus, she faced the same uncertain future confronting many young graduates: a shrinking job market and limited employment opportunities.

Instead of joining the queue for scarce jobs, the 27-year-old chose a different path. She turned to agriculture, not as a last resort, but as a business opportunity.

Today, Dlamini is the founder of Green Harvest Farm, a growing commercial vegetable enterprise in Hlane that is steadily proving how technical knowledge, climate-smart innovation and determination can be transformed into a viable agribusiness.

The young farmer, who recently completed the Innovative Climate-Smart Youth Tunnel Production Training Programme at the Women Farmer Foundation (WFF) in Sidvokodvo's Riders Ranch, believes the programme gave her more than practical farming skills. It gave her the confidence to build the future she had always imagined.

"I refused to sit down and complain about unemployment. Agriculture gave me the opportunity to create my own job and become my own boss," Dlamini said.

Her enterprise spans four hectares, although two hectares are currently under production. One hectare is dedicated to tomatoes and another to green peppers, while watermelons form part of her expanding production portfolio.

For Dlamini, every crop represents another step towards building a sustainable farming business.

From Classroom Knowledge to Commercial Farming

Unlike many first-generation farmers who enter agriculture through family tradition, Dlamini's passion was nurtured through education.

Studying Agricultural Extension introduced her to crop production, farmer advisory services and agricultural development. However, she says it was the Women Farmer Foundation's climate-smart training that transformed theoretical knowledge into commercial confidence.

The programme equipped participants with practical skills in tunnel production, sustainable farming, crop management, irrigation, pest and disease control, and modern production systems designed to withstand the growing challenges of climate change.

Just as importantly, it introduced participants to the realities of farming for the market.

“The programme helped me understand what consumers want and how to produce crops that meet market demands,” she explained.

“It also changed my mindset. I began to see farming not simply as growing vegetables, but as running a business that can create employment and improve livelihoods.”

One Moment Changed Everything

Every successful entrepreneur has a defining moment.

For Dlamini, that moment arrived while attending one of the Women Farmer Foundation’s youth competitions.

Watching young farmers receive awards and recognition sparked something within her.

“Seeing youth farmers being recognised and empowered inspired me deeply,” she recalled.

“I told myself, ‘One day it should be me.’ From that day, I became determined to work harder because I now had the skills. The only thing left was to implement them.”

That decision marked the beginning of Green Harvest Farm.

Farming for a Changing Climate

As climate change continues to expose farmers to erratic rainfall, prolonged dry spells and increasingly unpredictable weather, Dlamini believes the future of vegetable production lies in protected agriculture.

The climate-smart tunnel farming

techniques introduced during her training convinced her that the technology offers one of the most practical solutions for improving productivity while reducing production risks.

> **“I refused to sit down and complain about unemployment. Agriculture gave me the opportunity to create my own job and become my own boss”**

“Climate change has taught me that tunnel farming is the way to go,” she said.

“It protects crops from harsh weather conditions, reduces losses and allows farmers to produce quality vegetables more consistently.”

Her long-term strategy is already taking shape.

Income generated from her current farming operations will be reinvested into constructing tunnel infrastructure, enabling year-round production and improving the resilience of her business.

Learning Beyond the Field

Although Dlamini entered agriculture with formal qualifications, she believes farming continues to teach lessons that no classroom can provide.

Personally, she says the journey has strengthened her patience, discipline, resilience and self-belief.

Professionally, it has sharpened her understanding of crop management, commercial production and business planning.

“Every season teaches you something new,” she said.

“Agriculture requires continuous learning.”

Challenges That Shape Success

Like many young farmers entering commercial agriculture, Dlamini acknowledges that building a successful farming enterprise comes with challenges.

Understanding changing market demands while managing crops under increasingly unpredictable weather conditions remains one of her biggest hurdles.

Rather than allowing those obstacles to discourage her, she has embraced continuous learning.

She regularly seeks advice from experienced farmers while applying climate-smart practices such as efficient irrigation systems, crop rotation and integrated pest and disease management to improve production and minimise losses.

"I am still learning every day," she said.

"Experience comes with every season."

A Strong Support System

Behind Green Harvest Farm stands a family that believed in the dream long before the business began taking shape.

Dlamini credits her partner, mother, siblings and friends for providing constant encouragement throughout her journey.

Their support, she says, gave her the confidence to persevere during difficult moments and remain focused on achieving her goals.

Looking Beyond Vegetables

Although vegetable production remains the backbone of her enterprise, Dlamini is already planning the next phase of expansion.

The natural wetland on her property presents an opportunity to diversify into aquaculture, allowing Green Harvest Farm to combine fish farming with horticultural production.

Diversification, she believes, will strengthen the business while creating additional income streams and improving long-term sustainability.

It is a vision that reflects a growing trend among young agripreneurs who increasingly view farming as an integrated business rather than a single production enterprise.

Changing Mindsets About Agriculture

For Dlamini, one of the biggest misconceptions facing young people is the belief that agriculture is a career of last resort.

She argues that farming has the potential to generate employment, build wealth and contribute meaningfully to national food security when approached professionally.

Her message to aspiring farmers is straightforward.

"Believe in agriculture and never be afraid to start small," she advised.

"Farming requires patience, commitment and continuous learning, but it has the power to transform lives. Trust in God, stay focused, continue learning and use your education to innovate."

Then she paused before sharing the words that have become the philosophy guiding both her business and her life:

"There is no shame in starting small. The only shame is staying small all your life."

For the young woman who once watched others receive awards and imagined herself standing among them, that dream is steadily becoming reality.

Today, Notsile Dlamini is no longer waiting for opportunity to find her.

She is cultivating it, one harvest at a time.

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Eswatini and Global Fund Deepen Partnership for a Healthier Future

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

From modern laboratories and medical oxygen infrastructure to digital health systems and advanced HIV prevention, Eswatini's partnership with The Global Fund is helping reshape the country's public health landscape.

MANZINI - Eswatini has reaffirmed its commitment to its longstanding partnership with The Global Fund, highlighting the institution's contribution towards building a stronger, more resilient and sustainable national health system. During high-level talks held at The Global Fund headquarters in Geneva on Wednesday, Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Russell Mmiso Dlamini conveyed the sincere appreciation of His Majesty King Mswati III, the Government and the people of the Kingdom of Eswatini for the organisation's continued support.

Speaking on behalf of His Majesty, the Prime Minister described the relationship as more than a financial partnership, saying it was founded on mutual accountability, shared responsibility and a common commitment to improving public health outcomes. Over the years, Global Fund

investments have supported Eswatini's response to HIV, tuberculosis and malaria, while also strengthening the country's broader healthcare infrastructure.
The Prime Minister said assistance provided through the COVID-19 Response Mechanism had significantly improved Eswatini's ability to prevent, detect and respond to public health emergencies. The support also enhanced the long-term resilience of the national health system by improving infrastructure, surveillance and emergency preparedness.

Strengthening Health Infrastructure

Among the key achievements highlighted during the meeting was the modernisation of the Lubombo Referral Laboratory.

The upgraded facility has strengthened Eswatini's disease surveillance and diagnostic capacity for HIV, tuberculosis, malaria and other emerging public health threats. Improved laboratory services are essential for early detection, accurate diagnosis and timely treatment.

The partnership has also supported the expansion of medical oxygen production and distribution infrastructure, ensuring that healthcare facilities are better equipped to manage patients requiring critical respiratory support. Investments in renewable energy systems have further improved the reliability of healthcare services, particularly in facilities where uninterrupted power is necessary for laboratory operations, medicine storage, digital systems and patient care.

Another significant development has been the establishment of the National Medical Waste Management Facility, which is expected to strengthen the safe collection, treatment and disposal of medical waste across the country.

Driving Digital Transformation

Digital transformation has become another important pillar of Eswatini's partnership with The Global Fund.

Investments have been directed towards improving health information systems, laboratory management platforms and pharmaceutical supply-chain systems. These interventions are helping Government strengthen planning, improve access to reliable health data and enhance the distribution of medicines and other essential medical commodities.

The Prime Minister also welcomed The Global Fund's support for the transformation of the Central Medical Stores into the Eswatini Medical Supplies Agency.

The reform is expected to improve governance, accountability and efficiency in the procurement, storage and distribution of essential medicines and medical supplies.
A reliable medical supply system is critical to ensuring that healthcare facilities have the commodities they need to provide uninterrupted services to patients.

Foundation for Medical Tourism

Rt. Hon. Dlamini also shared Eswatini's long-term ambition of developing a medical tourism sector as part of the Grand Plan for National Transformation.

He said the health infrastructure, systems and institutional reforms supported through The Global Fund had laid a strong foundation for the country to pursue this strategic aspiration.

Developing a medical tourism industry would require Eswatini to provide high-quality, reliable and specialised health services capable of

attracting patients from neighbouring countries and beyond.
The Prime Minister indicated that continued investment in laboratories, health technology, supply systems and specialised medical services would play an important role in positioning the country as a competitive healthcare destination.

Eswatini's Progress Commended

The Global Fund's Head of Grants Management, Mr Mark Edington, commended Eswatini for the progress made in strengthening its healthcare system and advancing the national response to HIV, tuberculosis and malaria.

He said the Kingdom's achievements positioned it as an example that could inspire other countries to accelerate progress in public health.

Mr Edington also praised Eswatini's commitment to domestic health financing, recognising the country's efforts to complement international support with national resources.

He further acknowledged Eswatini as one of the first countries to roll out Lenacapavir, a long-acting HIV prevention medicine.

The introduction of long-acting prevention options represents an important development in the national HIV response, particularly for people who may experience challenges adhering to daily prevention medication.

Commitment to Accountability

Reaffirming Government's commitment to the partnership, the Prime Minister assured The Global Fund that all investments would continue to be managed transparently, maintained responsibly and utilised efficiently.

He said Government would also work to ensure that programmes and infrastructure established through the partnership were sustainably financed in accordance with sound public financial management principles.

As Eswatini continues working towards universal access to quality healthcare, effective disease control and sustainable national development, its partnership with The Global Fund remains central to the country's health transformation agenda.

The meeting in Geneva reflected both the progress already achieved and the shared responsibility of ensuring that the gains made through the partnership are protected and expanded for future generations.

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E99 MILLION CLIMATE INVESTMENT STRENGTHENS ESWATINI'S DEFENCE AGAINST DROUGHTS AND FLOODS

BY: SIKHONA SIBANDZE | JOURNALIST

Manzini - Eswatini's farmers are set to benefit from stronger climate preparedness following the handover of two Italian Government-funded projects valued at more than E99 million.

Supported by the United Nations Development Programme, the projects include a €2.2 million, approximately E44 million, one-megawatt solar photovoltaic plant at Raleigh Fitkin Memorial Hospital and a US$3.4 million, approximately E55 million, national Early Warning System.

The Early Warning System is expected to improve weather forecasting, river monitoring and national preparedness for droughts, floods and other climate-related disasters. The projects were implemented under the Italy–Eswatini Climate Change and Environment Cooperation Programme and officially handed over during a ceremony at RFM Hospital in Manzini.

Deputy Prime Minister Thulisile Dladla, representing Prime Minister Russell Mmiso Dlamini, said the handover marked an important milestone in the partnership between Eswatini and Italy.

For the agricultural sector, the Early Warning System could become an important production tool. Timely weather information can help farmers adjust planting dates, conserve irrigation water, protect livestock and prepare feed reserves before drought conditions worsen.

Flood warnings can also allow farmers to move animals, secure machinery and protect irrigation pumps, canals, fields, roads and bridges before rivers overflow. Reflecting on the severe El Niño drought that affected Southern Africa about a decade ago, Dladla said farmers and businesses had suffered major losses.

"The enhanced Early Warning System is therefore expected to strengthen national preparedness should similar climate shocks occur again," she said.

The projects were delivered through cooperation among the ministries of Tourism and Environmental Affairs, Natural Resources and Energy, and Health. Minister of Tinkhundla Administration and Development Sikhumbuzo Dlamini, speaking on behalf of Tourism and Environmental Affairs Minister Jane Mkhonta-Simelane, said collaboration among the beneficiary ministries had been central to the successful implementation of the projects.

"The project implementation has been a success, courtesy of smooth and seamless collaborations between the three beneficiary ministries," he said.

The RFM renewable energy project includes a one-megawatt solar plant with battery storage, electric washing and drying machines, an electric boiler, energy-efficient lighting, heat exchangers and air-conditioning systems.

The investment also enabled the hospital to eliminate its coal-fired boiler, reducing its reliance on fossil fuels and improving long-term energy efficiency. UNDP Resident Representative Henrik Franklin described the handover as a demonstration of what can be achieved when international support is aligned with national priorities.

"This investment is not only financial. It is a statement of solidarity with the people of Eswatini," Franklin said.

He explained that the Early Warning Systems Project was strengthening national climate preparedness through automated weather stations, river-flow gauges, forecasting systems and improved technical capacity.

However, the project's real value will depend on whether warnings reach communities and farmers in time for them to act. Extension officers, local authorities, radio stations, farmer organisations and mobile communication platforms will therefore be important in translating technical forecasts into clear and practical information.

Although Eswatini contributes less than 0.007 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and remains a net carbon sink, the country continues to face serious climate risks. The two projects may not plant crops or feed livestock directly, but they strengthen the systems farmers depend on: reliable weather information, resilient infrastructure, clean energy and institutions capable of responding before disaster strikes.

TAIWAN INVESTS E2.4 MILLION IN CLIMATE-SMART FARMING TRAINING FOR 200 EMASWATI YOUTH

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

SIDVOKODVO — Two hundred young Emaswati are set to acquire specialised skills in protected tunnel farming through a new E2.4 million climate-smart agriculture training programme aimed at strengthening food security, building resilience to climate change and creating sustainable employment opportunities.

The three-month Innovative Climate-Smart Youth Tunnel Production Training Programme, launched at Riders Ranch in Sidvokodvo, is fully funded by the Republic of China (Taiwan). The sponsorship covers tuition, accommodation, meals and transport, enabling participants drawn from across Eswatini to receive practical agricultural training at no cost.

Implemented by the Woman Farmer Foundation (WFF), in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Education and Training, the programme focuses on protected crop production and modern irrigation systems.

Tunnel farming allows producers to create more controlled growing environments, extending production seasons and reducing exposure to drought, erratic rainfall, extreme temperatures and certain pests. The technology is becoming increasingly important as climate change places greater pressure on conventional open-field agriculture.

The initiative also supports Eswatini's broader drive to modernise the agricultural sector by introducing technologies that can increase productivity, conserve water and improve the reliability of food production.

Agriculture as a business

Speaking during the launch, Acting Minister of Agriculture Hon. Bongani Nzima said perceptions of agriculture were changing, particularly among young people who increasingly viewed farming as a commercial enterprise capable of generating income, employment and long-term wealth.

He praised the Woman Farmer Foundation for developing a programme that had continued to expand despite the challenges facing agricultural training and youth development initiatives.

"It is through your unwavering perseverance and visionary leadership that this training project has not only survived but thrived through incredibly difficult times," Nzima said.

He urged the participants to view the programme as more than an academic exercise, saying the knowledge they gained should become the foundation for productive and commercially sustainable agribusinesses.

The young trainees, he added, had an opportunity not only to create livelihoods for themselves but also to establish businesses capable of employing others, supporting local supply chains and contributing to national economic growth.

From 20 trainees to more than 500

Woman Farmer Foundation Founder and Director Sonia Paiva said the initiative had grown significantly since it began with only 20 trainees in 2021.

More than 500 young agripreneurs have since received training through the foundation, while Taiwan's support has enabled approximately 440 young people to participate in sponsored programmes since 2024.

The funding has widened access to technical agricultural education for aspiring farmers who might otherwise have been unable to afford tuition and the related costs of residential training.

Paiva also announced that the Ministry of Education and Training had accredited the Woman Farmer Foundation Training Centre under the Technical and Vocational Education and Training system.

The accreditation formally recognises the institution as a national training centre for climate-smart agriculture and strengthens the credibility of the qualifications and practical skills offered to participants.

Paiva said protected production gave young farmers a commercial advantage by allowing them to produce throughout the year and supply markets more consistently, even when changing weather conditions disrupted open-field farming.

Technology, skills and opportunity

Representing the Taiwan Embassy, Dr Sofia Jeng said the latest E2.4 million investment represented the third consecutive phase of Taiwan's support for the programme.

She said the partnership was designed to strengthen Eswatini's agricultural sector through the transfer of modern technologies, including protected cultivation, efficient irrigation and improved production management.

These systems can help farmers increase output while using water more efficiently, an increasingly important consideration as the country experiences longer dry spells and less predictable rainfall.

Dr Jeng said investing in agricultural knowledge and technology was among the most sustainable ways of strengthening national food security while opening new economic opportunities for young people.

Agriculture Principal Secretary Sydney Simelane reinforced the need for participants to approach farming as a business rather than a subsistence activity.
He said successful commercial agriculture required production planning, disciplined financial management, accurate record-keeping, access to markets and a clear understanding of consumer demand.

Simelane said Eswatini's longstanding agricultural partnership with Taiwan had already generated measurable results across several value chains. He pointed to the country's achievement of self-sufficiency in pork production as evidence of what sustained investment in technology, technical expertise and international cooperation could deliver.

Graduates from previous training intakes have established commercial vegetable enterprises and diversified farming operations in different parts of the country, demonstrating that specialised skills can be converted into viable businesses.

As climate risks intensify and demand for dependable local food supplies rises, the programme represents more than an investment in 200 young people. It signals a strategic shift towards a new generation of technologically equipped farmers capable of producing efficiently, responding to changing weather conditions and building businesses that strengthen Eswatini's long-term food and economic security.

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE ENDORSES INDUSTRIAL HEMP ADAPTABILITY TRIALS IN ESWATINI

BY: NOSIPHO MKHIZE | JOURNALIST

MANZINI - Eswatini has taken a cautious but significant step towards exploring the commercial potential of industrial hemp, with the Ministry of Agriculture endorsing controlled adaptability trials to determine whether the crop can be grown successfully under local conditions.

The proposed research will assess how selected industrial hemp varieties perform across different production environments, while generating the technical evidence needed to guide future policy, investment and commercial planning.

The Ministry's endorsement applies specifically to research and should not be interpreted as approval for unrestricted cultivation or immediate commercial production. Any expansion beyond the trial phase will depend on the findings, further government approvals and the development of a clear regulatory framework.
The initiative reflects growing interest in industrial hemp as a possible source of raw material for textiles, construction products, food, cosmetics, research and manufacturing. However, stakeholders have agreed that Eswatini must first establish whether the crop is agronomically suitable, commercially viable and capable of being regulated effectively.

Research before commercialisation

Industrial hemp is produced from varieties of the cannabis plant cultivated for industrial use rather than for intoxicating effects. Its fibres, seeds and oils can be processed into a wide range of products, including fabrics, insulation materials, animal feed, personal-care products and certain food ingredients.

Despite this potential, the crop requires careful management because of its relationship to other cannabis varieties and the legal controls associated with them. Adaptability trials are therefore expected to assess not only yields and crop performance, but also compliance, seed selection, site management and monitoring requirements.

The research process will help determine which varieties are best suited to Eswatini's climatic and soil conditions, how much water and fertiliser they require, their resistance to pests and diseases, and whether they can produce raw material that meets industrial standards.

Mkhabela said the country should avoid rushing into commercial production before sufficient local evidence had been gathered.

"We must remain realistic and allow the research findings to determine the most suitable production model for Eswatini," Mkhabela said. "The country needs evidence that can withstand scrutiny and give policymakers, investors and farmers confidence."

The trials are expected to provide information that can support decisions on production zones, licensing requirements, processing opportunities, market access and the level of investment required to establish a functional industry.

Farmers must not be spectators

Trevor Shongwe, Secretary-General of the Eswatini Hemp and Cannabis Association, said local farmers should be placed at the centre of the emerging value chain from its earliest stages.

"Our priority is to ensure that emaSwati farmers are not spectators in an industry being developed on their own soil," Shongwe said. "They must participate in the trials, acquire skills and eventually benefit from production, processing and ownership opportunities."

His remarks point to a wider concern often associated with emerging agricultural industries: that local producers may supply raw materials while most of the value is captured elsewhere through processing, branding, manufacturing and distribution.

Shongwe said the development of the hemp sector should therefore create opportunities for farmers to participate beyond primary production. This could include ownership in processing facilities, seed multiplication, research services, product development and organised marketing structures.

He added that a regulated industry could also create legitimate routes into the formal economy for growers who currently operate outside recognised agricultural and commercial systems.

"Research and regulation can create a pathway from informality to a legitimate industry," Shongwe said. "That pathway must protect local farmers, open access to finance and markets, and ensure that the economic value remains visible in Eswatini."

For farmers to benefit meaningfully, they will require training, certified planting material, technical support, affordable finance and guaranteed access to credible markets. Without these elements, commercial production could expose growers to high input costs and uncertain demand.

Building the institutional framework

Participants proposed that a two-day strategic planning workshop be held before the end of August to establish the structures required to coordinate the research programme.

The workshop is expected to create a steering structure, research committee and specialised working groups. It will also seek to finalise trial protocols, identify and register production sites, assign responsibilities and clarify funding arrangements.

Coordination with relevant regulators will be central to the process. Trial sites will need to be documented and monitored, while planting material, crop handling, harvesting and transportation will require appropriate controls.

The research committee will also need to determine how data will be collected, verified and shared. Reliable information will be essential if the findings are to guide legislation, attract investors and support commercial decisions.

A possible new value chain

Should the trials confirm that industrial hemp can be produced competitively under local conditions, Eswatini could begin developing a value chain linking agriculture with manufacturing and product development.

Hemp fibre can be used in textiles, rope, paper, insulation and environmentally friendly building materials. Hemp seeds and oils may support food, animal-feed and cosmetic industries, subject to health and regulatory standards.

Local processing would be critical. Exporting unprocessed fibre or seed would offer farmers some income, but greater economic value would be created by converting the crop into finished or semi-finished products within Eswatini.

The initiative therefore presents an opportunity to examine not only how hemp grows, but also who will buy it, where it will be processed and how benefits will be distributed.

For now, the country's approach remains deliberately measured. Stakeholders have agreed that ambition must be matched by research, regulation and realistic commercial planning.

Eswatini's hemp opportunity will ultimately be determined not by international excitement around the crop, but by evidence gathered from local fields, the strength of its regulatory institutions and the extent to which emaSwati farmers are included in the value chain.

E8 BILLION SUGAR REVENUE MASKS A DEEPER CASH-FLOW SQUEEZE

BY: SIKHONA SIBANDZE | JOURNALIST

MANZINI - Eswatini's sugar industry generated about E8 billion in revenue during the 2025/26 season, reinforcing its position as one of the country's most important economic sectors. Yet behind the impressive turnover lies a more complicated story of tightening margins, rising finance costs, uneven productivity and growing pressure on growers' cash flow.

The industry remains productive and internationally competitive. Sales volumes recovered, production remained strong and investment in value addition continued. However, higher revenue did not automatically translate into stronger profitability or more cash in growers' bank accounts.

That distinction is becoming increasingly important for an industry exposed to volatile global prices, expensive working capital, climate disruptions and heavy dependence on a limited number of markets.

For farmers, particularly small-scale growers, the season highlighted a fundamental agribusiness lesson: producing more and selling more does not necessarily mean earning more.

Strong turnover, tighter margins

Revenue represents the total value of sugar sold, but it does not account for the costs incurred in producing, financing, processing and marketing that sugar.

Growers must pay for fertiliser, chemicals, irrigation, electricity, labour, harvesting, transport and loan repayments, often months before they receive income from their crop. When input and borrowing costs rise faster than the returns received from sugar sales, cash-flow pressure intensifies even when total industry

revenue is growing.

This means that an industry may report billions of Emalangeni in turnover while individual producers struggle to meet immediate obligations.

Lower or weaker sugar prices can further dilute the benefit of increased production. A larger crop sold into a softer market may lift overall revenue without significantly improving returns per tonne. At the same time, interest charged on seasonal loans and other working-capital facilities can consume a growing share of growers' earnings.

Climate-related disruptions add another layer of risk. Unpredictable rainfall, prolonged heat, pest outbreaks and pressure on water resources can reduce yields, raise irrigation costs and delay harvesting. These conditions place the greatest strain on smaller producers, who usually have less financial room to absorb setbacks.

Productivity is the untapped opportunity

Small-scale farmers form the overwhelming majority of Eswatini's active cane-growing community, yet their contribution to total cane production remains disproportionately low.

Closing the productivity gap between smaller growers and large commercial estates represents one of the industry's biggest opportunities. Higher yields and improved sucrose recovery among existing growers could lift national sugar output without requiring a substantial expansion of land under cane.

The priority, therefore, should not only be planting more hectares. It should be producing more marketable sugar from every hectare already under cultivation.

This will require stronger extension services, better farm governance, effective pest and disease surveillance, improved irrigation management and greater access to locally adapted cane varieties.

Digital crop-monitoring systems could help farmers identify water stress, disease threats and production inefficiencies earlier. Better field data would also allow growers to plan harvesting, manage inputs and track costs more accurately.

The industry is already showing signs of technological transition. By March 2026, 40 growers had installed a combined 10 megawatts of solar-generation capacity. The move towards renewable energy could reduce exposure to rising electricity costs, particularly for irrigation-dependent farms.

Three new cane varieties were also ready but awaiting approval, while plans were advancing for the establishment of a domestic sugar research and development hub.

Locally driven research could help the industry develop varieties suited to Eswatini's soils, temperatures, rainfall patterns and emerging disease risks. It could also reduce dependence on imported technologies that may not always respond adequately to local conditions.

These developments demonstrate that the future competitiveness of small-scale growers will depend increasingly on access to technology, affordable finance, professional governance and reliable technical advice—not merely access to land.

The central lesson for agribusiness

The 2025/26 sugar results illustrate the important difference between production, revenue, profit and cash flow.

Production tells a farmer how much cane was grown. Revenue shows the value of what was sold. Profit measures what remains after expenses have been deducted. Cash flow determines whether the business has enough money available to pay workers, service loans, buy inputs and continue operating today.

A sustainable agribusiness must manage all four.

A farm can produce a strong crop but lose money because of poor prices or excessive costs. It can record an accounting profit while still facing a cash shortage because payments have not yet been received. It can also generate high revenue while borrowing heavily to finance its operations.

Eswatini's sugar industry remains strategically important, supporting livelihoods, exports, rural development and industrial activity. However, the latest results show that headline revenue cannot be the only measure of success.

The next phase of growth must be assessed through sucrose produced per hectare, energy cost per tonne, interest paid on working capital, cash collected, value added locally and the returns ultimately reaching growers.

That is how Eswatini can ensure that its "green gold" continues creating sustainable WEALTH not merely impressive turnover.

POTATOES WIDE OPEN, TOMATOES CROWDED : NAMBOARD'S NEW DATA GIVES FARMERS A SMARTER WAY TO PLANT

BY: SIBUSISO MNGADI | EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

MANZINI - For many years, vegetable farmers in Eswatini have made planting decisions based on experience, word of mouth or the previous season's prices. While that approach has sometimes paid off, it has also resulted in a familiar cycle: too many farmers plant the same crop, markets become flooded, prices collapse and tonnes of fresh produce go unsold.

The National Agricultural Marketing Board (NAMBoard) is now using data to change that narrative.

Through its monthly Area Planted Reports, published on the Eswatini Horticulture Information System (EHIS), the board is providing farmers with evidence-based guidance on which crops offer market opportunities and which are likely to face oversupply. By comparing hectares already planted with estimated national demand, the reports aim to help producers make informed decisions before committing resources to a crop.

The latest report, dated 30 June 2026 and providing planting guidance for July, reveals a market with significant imbalances. While demand remains strong for crops such as potatoes, carrots and onions, tomatoes, beetroot and green pepper are showing signs of oversupply, increasing the risk of lower prices for growers.

Potatoes present the biggest opportunity

According to the report, potatoes remain the country's largest production gap.

Eswatini requires an estimated 35.20 hectares of potatoes every month to meet domestic demand. However, EHIS data shows that no potatoes were planted in April, only 1.17 hectares were planted in May and none were recorded in June.

Based on those figures, NAMBoard concludes that farmers can expand potato production with minimal risk of creating a market glut.

The same trend is evident in carrots and onions.

Carrot production remains well below demand, with only 0.06

hectares planted in June compared to the estimated monthly requirement of 9.01 hectares. Onion plantings reached only 2.26 hectares against expected demand of 8.53 hectares.

Cabbage also remains below required production levels. June plantings totalled 0.15 hectares against a monthly demand of 1.65 hectares. While this suggests room for expansion, NAMBoard advises growers to increase production cautiously because cabbage markets can become oversupplied relatively quickly if many farmers harvest simultaneously.

For producers willing to plan carefully, these crops present opportunities to replace imports, strengthen local food security and capture unmet market demand.

Tomatoes, beetroot and green pepper face market pressure

The outlook is considerably different for several other vegetables.

Beetroot production exceeded estimated market demand during both April and May. Farmers planted 8.99 hectares in April and 10.54 hectares in May against an estimated monthly demand of 7.26 hectares. Although plantings declined to 4.99 hectares in June, produce from earlier plantings is expected to continue reaching the market.

Tomatoes followed a similar trend.

April plantings reached 8.57 hectares, while May recorded 9.51 hectares, both comfortably above the estimated monthly requirement of 6.34 hectares. Even though June planting levels eased, the harvesting period means crops planted during late May are likely to mature alongside those planted in June, increasing the possibility of oversupply.

Green pepper also carries a cautionary message. Plantings reached 6.59 hectares in April and 3.65 hectares in May against estimated local demand of only 2.17 hectares.

Because green pepper can be harvested over an extended period of up to eight weeks, produce from previous plantings may still be entering the market when newer crops are harvested.

For all three crops, NAMBoard advises that only farmers already operating under formal contracts or production programmes should continue planting.

Export opportunities remain available

The report also highlights opportunities beyond the domestic market.

Green beans and baby marrow remain well below confirmed export demand. June plantings totalled just 0.18 hectares for green beans against a monthly requirement of 4.17 hectares, while baby marrow reached only 0.42 hectares compared with demand for 4.00 hectares.

NAMBoard is encouraging Global GAP-certified farmers to approach the board to access export contracts and structured planting programmes.

Hot chilli tells a slightly different story. Local production has exceeded domestic demand for three consecutive months, yet certified growers can still benefit from export opportunities through organised marketing arrangements.

A planning tool for smarter farming

The Area Planted Reports are generated using information submitted by farmers through the Eswatini Horticulture Information System. Growers register their farms, indicate the crops they have planted, record planting dates and estimate harvesting periods.

That information enables NAMBoard to compare expected supply with market demand and to regulate imports where local production is sufficient.

However, the board emphasises that the reports are intended as a planning tool rather than a guarantee of sales. Farmers who produce outside formal contracts or approved planting programmes do so at their own commercial risk.

The wider production trend is equally revealing. Total recorded plantings declined from 44.27 hectares in April to 36.24 hectares in May before falling sharply to 15.24 hectares in June, against a combined estimated monthly demand of 83.63 hectares.

For Eswatini's horticulture sector, the figures highlight both challenge and opportunity. The country still imports vegetables that could be produced locally, while some farmers continue planting crops already facing oversupply.

NAMBoard's monthly reports are designed to bridge that gap. Rather than relying on speculation or last season's prices, farmers now have access to real-time production data that can guide smarter decisions, reduce unnecessary losses and improve profitability. As agriculture becomes increasingly data-driven, timely market information may prove just as valuable as good seed, fertile soil and favourable weather.

Filling the Gaps in Farmer Training for Sustainable Livestock Enterprises (Shifting the Paradigm)

BY MNCEDISI SIMELANE

Over the past few years, our capacity-building trainings have heavily emphasized the core mechanics of livestock production. We have delivered extensive training on herd health, basic husbandry, reproductive management, and daily operational practices. As a result of these efforts, our farmers now possess a solid foundational knowledge of livestock production. They know how to keep their animals alive, healthy, and productive.

However, the observations from the field reveal a persistent disconnect while production skills have improved, many livestock enterprises continue to struggle with profitability, resilience, and long-term viability. The reality on the ground indicates that mastering production is only half the battle. To build truly sustainable agribusinesses, we must shift our focus from basic production techniques toward the strategic, commercial, and financial realities of modern farming. Our upcoming training sessions will be intentionally reoriented to address these critical operational gaps.

Core Areas of Focus for Advanced Capacity Building

To ensure our farmers transition from baseline producers to thriving commercial entrepreneurs, our workshops, going forward, will target the following key areas:

1. Financial Literacy & Management of Funds

A common limitation observed in the field is the intermingling of household finances with farming revenues. Without clear record-keeping, cash flow management, and budgeting, even a productively successful farm can fail financially. Our sessions will focus on establishing dedicated farm accounting systems, understanding profit margins, and reinvesting farm capital strategically rather than treating gross revenue as personal profit.

2. Progressive Risk Mitigation Measures

Livestock farming is inherently exposed to unpredictable environmental and economic shocks, including drought, disease outbreaks, and market volatility. Future trainings will cover proactive risk planning, diversification of farm revenue streams, fodder reserves, micro-insurance options, and enterprise-

level biosecurity protocols.

3. Negotiating Contractual Sales Agreements

Many farmers remain price-takers, relying on informal spot-market transactions that leave them vulnerable to middleman exploitation and seasonal price crashes. Training will equip farmers to understand and negotiate off-take agreements, meet formal buyer specifications,

and protect their enterprises against breach of contract.

4. Precision Nutrition: Choosing the Right Feeds
Feed costs often account for up to 70% of production expenses. Misinformed choices, such as over-specifying feed for low-yield stock or buying cheap, nutrient-poor feeds, severely erode profit margins. We will pivot toward evaluating feed quality, formulating cost-effective rations based on production goals, and maximizing on-farm fodder utilization for enterprises such as beef production.

5. Strategic Genetics: Choosing the Right Genes
Unplanned breeding and poor genetic selection remain major bottlenecks. Our updated trainings will emphasize selecting livestock based on quantifiable performance indicators (such as feed conversion ratios and fertility rates), matching genetics to local climatic conditions, and avoiding inbreeding depression.

6. Branding Livestock Produce & Online Marketing
In a crowded market, livestock products are frequently sold as unbranded commodities. We will focus on modern market positioning, building a unique brand identity around farm practices, meeting retail consumer expectations, and leveraging social media and digital marketplaces to connect directly with end consumers and bulk buyers.

Hands-On Technical Support: The Feedmaster Commitment

Recognizing these challenges is only the first step; actively solving them requires continuous, tailored support. To ensure that the concepts taught in these sessions translate into real-world results, the **Feedmaster Technical Team** is fully prepared and dedicated to assisting farmers with any operational hurdles they encounter.

Direct Farm Assistance: Our support extends far beyond standard advice or telephonic consultations. The Feedmaster Technical Team actively visits farms to conduct physical, on-site audits. By walking the ground alongside the farmer, evaluating herd condition, assessing feeding setups, and examining daily management practices, our experts provide personalized solutions tailored directly to the farm's unique limitations.

Driving Sustainable Impact

By addressing these specific field limitations and pairing classroom learning with on-the-ground technical support, we are elevating our farmers to the next level of commercial maturity. Equipping farmers with financial acumen, strategic market access, precise input selection, and modern marketing tools transforms farming from a lifestyle activity into a resilient, profitable enterprise.

Our upcoming training calendar and field visits will reflect this targeted approach, ensuring that every farmer receives the actionable skills and direct technical backing needed to safeguard their livelihood and drive the future of the livestock sector. Feel free to contact 79053030 for more information or 7888 8841.

Repayments that fit your **cashflow**

IDCE tailors loan repayments in line with your revenue cycle, helping farmer companies protect operations, stay productive, and grow without unnecessary pressure.

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