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Will Coetsee from Botanica Natural Products in a field of Bulbine and Moringa. Picture: Jonathon Rees

Building stronger communities through farming

By Supplied Content ⌚ Mar 23, 2018



In South Africa, entrepreneurs are using farming to uplift rural and urban communities, and in doing so moving the country closer to achieving its development goals.

Will Coetsee runs his family-owned social enterprise Botanica Natural Products, near Alldays in northernmost Limpopo, a province which hosts 10% of the country's population but only contributes 7% of the GDP.

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At the farm and small factory, an indigenous South African plant Bulbine is planted, harvested and gel extracted from its leaves to be sold to the cosmetic market.

Although the business only employs 28 people, the ripple effects of Botanica’s operations are felt across the Blouberg Local Municipality’s area – which is characterised by unemployment, illiteracy and high levels of HIV/Aids. The area also has more women and children than men, as many men move to cities to find employment.

South Africa’s National Development Plan (NDP) recognises that entrepreneurs are vital for increasing job creation in the country. It also names agriculture as one sector with immense potential for creating jobs, developing the rural economy and empowering farm workers.

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Coetsee has made sure that there are growth opportunities for his employees. He encourages them to teach new employees how to do their jobs so that they themselves can move up to supervisor and managerial positions.

“Because of the high unemployment rate in this area, we had to help people overcome the fear that if they teach someone else to do their job, they’ll be replaced.”

Out of the 28 employees, four have become managers and three supervisors, while the rest work in the plantations or on processing the product in the factory. Together they provide for more than 300 people.

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Botanica is the first and only producer of the Bulbine extract in the world and when the enterprise was launched in 2011, Coetsee and his staff had to learn about the product and production methods on the job.

“My staff had to learn and grow with me,” he says.



Munyaradzi Makumbe shows off Pak-choi grown using his Torima Growpods system. Picture: Torima Growpods

Happy staff, happy business

Botanica staff are also given opportunities to make extra income. The business sells its finished products to them at a discount so that they can resell it and keep the profit.

Upskilling his staff is also a priority for Coetsee: Marketing, business management and professional development workshops equip employees with skills to start their own ventures.

Skills development features strongly in the NDP. “South Africa needs faster and more inclusive growth. Key elements of this strategy include... improving skills development,” it reads. A central goal is to improve and increase skills development specifically in the agricultural sector, something that Coetsee is doing.

Botanica employees can attend two monthly clinic days without taking leave. The business also pays for them to attend first aid courses, as well as HIV/Aids awareness and family planning workshops each year.

“We’re not just looking after their wellbeing,” Coetsee admits. “Healthy employees also take fewer sick days, which is good for the business.”

Branching out

Coetsee’s contributions to uplifting his community were one of the reasons he won a SEED Award in 2014. SEED, a global partnership that supports innovative SMEs, provides entrepreneurial solutions to sustainability challenges in developing countries.

Funding that Coetsee got through SEED exposure allowed him to start diversifying Botanica. The business recently planted 7 000 Moringa trees and makes powder from its leaves for the nutritional market.

“We’ve donated Moringas to local schools, and we teach them how to plant the trees and how to harvest seeds and leaves. Then we buy those back and extract the powder to sell on. This creates revenue for the schools so that they can buy water tanks or drill boreholes, for example.”

More than 200 people are expected to be employed once the project has been fully established.



Spinach grown by a Soweto ECD centre using Torima Growpods. Picture: Torima Growpods

Farming in towns and cities

Farming outside of the rural comfort zone, Johannesburg based small business, Torima Growpods, is also making a difference in communities. Growpods use little water and don’t need any soil. They are given to schools, food gardens, and Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in urban areas where people earn very little.

The easy-to-use Growpod is a plastic container filled with a nutrient solution to grow

herbs and leafy vegetables like spinach with. With a Growpod, schools can grow nutritious food with a fifth of the water it usually takes. The plants also grow 25% faster, and crops can be grown anywhere, even indoors.

Torima Growpods founder, Munyaradzi Makumbe says NGOs or corporate social investment projects buy the Growpods to sponsor needy organisations.

At the end of 2017, eight of the one square metre ankle-height Growpods were set up at two ECD centres in Slovoville, Soweto.

“Within six weeks the centres were harvesting spinach. They use it to feed the children, the staff take some home, and the surplus is sold to help fund the schools.”

Makumbe says that this type of urban farming is an easy way to uplift communities. It’s easy to learn, and doesn’t require daily watering, weeding or digging, leaving time for the growers to pursue other employment.

Like Coetsee, Makumbe also got support from SEED, while his business was still a concept. Through its starter workshop he was able to do early stage market research and business and product development – all of which helped get his business off the ground.

Both Makumbe and Coetsee have taken their role in uplifting communities seriously, each contributing to the goals of the NDP in their own way.

“These small businesses make a big impact,” said Rest Kanju at SEED South Africa. “It’s very satisfying to be able to support them to ensure their business models are sustainable, so that they can keep having such a positive influence on their communities.”

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