

In His Voice:

GERDIE LANDMAN: DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

“We don't need to reinvent the wheel. There are excellent models of farmer development and land reform in South Africa that are highly appropriate to the land situation today,” says Gerdie Landman, leading South African dairy farmer from the Cookhouse/Fish River Valley and founder, owner and manager of Mooimelk Koeihotel which produces **15** million litres **of milk** a year.

“The bottom line is that we need successful farmers, and we need to encourage a new generation of younger farmers to commit to farming and make a success of it. How do you do this? You look to farm and farmer development projects in the past that have worked in South Africa. I know they have worked because I participated in one as a young man of 28 with nothing but a matric, some farming experience and a desire to farm.

In 1983 the government launched a dairy-farming project where 19 farmers under the age of 35 were selected out of 2000 applicants to purchase 19 state-owned pieces of land in the Tsitsikamma region, 200 hectares each, and develop them into dairy farms.

The project was financed through the government-supported agricultural development bank at the time called ‘Landbou Krediet en Grond Besit’ (**Department of Agricultural land tenure**), and it was advertised in the newspapers and magazines, including Farmer's Weekly.

The land cost R200 000 for the 200 hectares but it was completely unfarmed. It was just a piece of bushveld really, it had no infrastructure, no fences, no house, nothing. Through Landbou Krediet en Grond Besit the successful applicants were offered a

fixed interest rate of 8% at a time when the general interest rate was between 18% and 24%.

All applicants had to be under 35, they had to have assets of between R100 000 and R300 000 and either some form of tertiary education or, if you only had a matric, you had to prove you had enough farming experience to qualify. To raise the required assets, applicants either committed whatever livestock they had or they sold their house or secured loans from the commercial banks or family members. The main criterion was that you were not allowed to own too much, you had to be financially disadvantaged to a certain degree to qualify for the land. At the same time you had to prove you were capable and credit-worthy enough to access some funds to help build up the farm.

Amongst the successful applicants, some had been farm foremen or managers and one was an agricultural extension officer. I had been farming our family farm in Queenstown for my Mother. It had been in our family for 85 years and it was bought out by the government to expand the boundaries of the Ciskei. It was a time of land reconfiguration, which, in its many forms, has proved an inevitable cycle in the history of South Africa.

The interview for the nineteen farmers was held by a committee from the Landbou Krediet en Grond Besit, comprising the agricultural extension officer for the Tsitsikamma district, several prominent, successful farmers from the area and the magistrate of the district who represented the state as Chairman of the committee.

You had to take your wife to the interview because they needed to know that your wife was committed to giving it a go with you because it was a really tough challenge. As I mentioned, there were no houses on the land and we lived in a caravan for quite some time.

The committee made it very clear that it was not an easy undertaking and that it would take complete commitment and *wasbyt*. Today's people are led to believe that it is easy to start farming, that all you need is land.

From the outset of the project the members of the Land Krediet en Grond Besit committee mentored us with our planning, our finance applications for livestock, our infrastructure development and they helped us solve the problems we faced along the way. **The local Humansdorp Co-op was also involved in financing production loans to the new farmers. With their superior knowledge of local conditions, their roll in supporting the group of farmers was very valuable.... For example, my brother Daan Landman, who was also a successful applicant, had managed to purchase 100 cows, but to become economically viable, he needed an additional 100 cows. They considered his needs, they assessed the manner in which he was developing his farm and they decided to assist him in securing a loan for the additional 100 cows. That is what launched him. – Sorry Heather, my brother Daan prefers to be left out of this one...**

The success of the project was measured after ten years. Twelve of the nineteen made a success of farming in the Tsitsikamma and were milking 500 or more cows on their 200-hectare farms after ten years. Of the twelve, six had a matric and six had tertiary qualifications.

Regarding the other seven: one farmer fell out fast, one emigrated to New Zealand, three continued to farm successfully but moved to other areas in South Africa and two gave up farming.

Clearly the project was a success. And it was a success despite subsequent complications, notably that the nineteen farms were reclaimed as part of the post '94 land restitution process. It was the

second time I had lost a farm, but I am a farmer, that is what I love and do best and I continued to farm my Tsitsikamma farm for a further fifteen years, renting the land, until I bought my current farm in the Fish River Valley.

My brother Daan is still successfully farming in Tsitsikamma on another farm, and all the farmers who proved themselves in that project have continued to farm successfully in South Africa.

It must be stressed that the government paid market related prices for our Tsitsikamma farms and the process of payment on registration was properly and timeously executed. There can be no other way. Politics will come and go, but the government needs to realise that food security is the issue here and focus on this.

The same agricultural extension officer who helped the nineteen of us so much in Tsitsikamma is still there at his same base in Humansdorp. But he has no petrol to visit the farms. Without the basic resources he cannot do his job properly. In many situations throughout South Africa, the guys are there, and the knowledge and experience is there, but it is not being utilised and resourced.

In any district in this country there are also top notch, highly experienced, successful farmers who want to help and are keen to help and empower new farmers, including their staff, but the state needs to support us.

I sent a proposal and business plan to Land Affairs motivating them to purchase the farm next to mine, which could then be developed by my staff as their farm under my mentorship. **(Land Affairs could have come back to us and said they will only buy the land if my staff paid them back over a period, but they did not consider the proposal at all.)** Their response was that they do not buy irrigation land because it is too expensive. Yet they are going ahead and buying plenty of irrigation land in the Fish River

Valley for the sugar beet scheme, which is far from proven as an economically viable form of agriculture.

The government needs to reach out to the hand being offered by commercial farmers all over the country. The farm development models are all there, the knowledge is there and there is great potential for farming once the powers that be recognise that it does not work to simply hand over land to people whom you call emerging farmers. Future farmers need to be put into projects like the one that built me up; they need support, structure and financial responsibility in order to rise to the many challenges of ownership of a farm. This is the only way to nurture people who really want to farm. Otherwise it is as nonsensical as putting someone behind the wheel of car who has never driven and wondering why they crash.”

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