

AGRICULTURE



PHOTOS: SHARON DELL
David Mongoato of Rockhaven Farm in Ongeluku Nek near Matatiele was one of nearly 100 farmers to attend a Potato Information Day held in Matatiele last week.

Help with farming the humble potato

SHARON DELL

THE potato is a popular crop among small-scale growers and emerging farmers in the Eastern Cape, but yields are variable and markets, when they can be accessed, are notoriously fickle.

In an attempt to support smaller farmers in both the production and marketing of the humble tuber, a potato information day organised jointly by local NGO SaveAct, the Environmental Development Agency (EDA) and rural development NGO Lima was held in Matatiele last week.

"These farmers are the most vulnerable and risk-prone, but they have to do everything at a higher cost," said Erna Kruger of Mahlathini Organics, a KwaZulu-Natal-based organisation which has been working with SaveAct to find ways to develop farming practices in the border area and to understand how the savings and credit activities of SaveAct groups can help to achieve that.

Reflecting the high demand for knowledge, the information day attracted nearly 100 small-scale and emerging farmers who had the opportunity to learn from and interact with representatives of national producer organisation Potatoes SA, fertiliser manufacturer Sasol, and Sanlam Agriculture. An overview of potato production was given by Cedara College's Morgan Naidoo.

"The day was designed around the farmers," said Kruger, many of whom face "real problems", ranging from accessing seed and high production costs to grading, storing and marketing.

"Many organisations, including World Vision and the Department of Agriculture, are trying to help," she said. "We think there are benefits to consolidating these efforts and bringing in partners from the commercial sector to help achieve economies of scale and reduce inequities in the market chain."

SaveAct has established a number of savings and credit groups among farmers in the Alfred Nzo and Ukhahlamba districts. Membership of these groups has not only improved the personal savings habits of individuals, but has given farmers ready access to low-interest loans and has introduced the prospect of collective buying of bulk inputs such as seed and fertiliser.



Organisers of the Potato Information Day held in Matatiele last week. From left: Siyanda Dlamini (development manager for World Vision, Matatiele), Nkululeko Nonjenge-Dianiwa (project co-ordinator for SaveAct's Local Economic Action Programme), Vuyo Mthiya (Environmental Development Agency), Roy Dandala (Lima Zone manager, Kokstad), Erna Kruger (Mahlathini Organics) and Gibson Mbutjana (Lima facilitator).

"In their first annual cycle of savings, groups tend to focus on meeting basic needs such as food, school fees and home renovations," said Kruger.

"In the second cycle, members start to think more strategically. Payout month is chosen to suit production cycles, larger loans are accessed and members start to see the potential that these groups hold for collective buying."

Kruger said her research into participatory markets points now to the need to increase yields and build local markets for a range of commodities, including potatoes.

"At the moment, there's a limit to the profits growers can achieve because yields are low.

"Also, large amounts are spent on seed potatoes, fertiliser and transport, so if anything goes wrong, there's little profit," she said.

According to Kruger, some farmers are planting low-grade table potatoes which are often more readily available than seed potatoes which need to be ordered from suppliers as much as six months in advance. But planting table potatoes can be counterproductive as they produce poorer yields and can also carry diseases which remain in the soil for up to 10 years, said Kruger.

Grading, pricing, transport and marketing also present challenges. According to the EDA's Vuyo Mthiya, some farmers struggle to understand how to price their produce, taking their cue from retail outlets. Growers in one area also tend to follow similar planting and harvesting times, which reduces the value of the crop.

Kruger believes that building a local village-based market for local growers will help them to build confidence and expertise around

marketing. "Research indicates that demand for fresh produce in villages outstrips supply. Selling in the villages is a way of getting a foot in the door of the local market," she said.

Kruger's research also points to the value of commodity-based interest groups between farmers and commercial farming representatives, such as Potatoes SA which has a mandate of its own to increase the number of black farmers who own, manage or control commercial potato production.

Regional manager for KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and North Eastern Cape, Louis Pretorius, said Potatoes SA serves the industry by keeping members informed about market prices and invests resources in the development of suitable potato cultivars. "We identify and support emerging farmers with sufficient land, providing seed for the first year and mentoring them over a five-year period to become commercial potato producers," said Pretorius.

The organisation's Pascal Chuene said Potatoes SA would consider farmers with at least 15 to 20 hectares at their disposal. But what about the smaller growers, some of whom work off one or two hectares? For them, the day produced an offer from the Department of Agriculture to play a role in co-ordinating advanced bulk orders. And Potatoes SA opened the door to further meetings with community representatives in order to assess the training and market support needs of smaller growers.

"It's still early days," said Kruger. "But we have started the process of bringing the parties together."