

LOSING OUR DAIRY BRAINS

by Fidelis Zvomuya

The South African agricultural sector faces a brain drain as farmers and farmworkers seek opportunities abroad.



Our country is suffering a chronic farming brain drain. Over the past few years, there has been a lot of unhappiness within the agricultural sector because farming enterprises in certain Western countries are mining South Africa for one of its vital natural resources – its people.

South Africans with agricultural experience are in high demand in other parts of the world, particularly in the United States.

The sector is haemorrhaging its most qualified and experienced young farmers and farmworkers. This, at a time when the country is facing a myriad of challenges that include political uncertainty, threats to farm security, load-shedding, and an economy that is tanking.

Those leaving and intending to leave are not holding their breath waiting for a promised change. Agricultural experts are saying that this does not bode well for the future of agriculture.

According to a survey conducted by the Inclusive Society Institute in late 2023, many skilled professionals and high-income earners are considering leaving the country. Some of these people are from the agricultural sector. This has raised serious concerns about loss of skills and the 'agricultural brain drain'.

Manuel Orozco, director of the migration, remittances, and development programme at the Inter-American Dialogue and senior fellow at the Harvard University Centre for International Development, says agricultural workers, including farmers, are leaving the South African agricultural sector much faster than they are being replaced.

Orozco says the United States and a few countries in the European Union can look like the promised land and halting emigration is no way to fix dysfunctional countries, mostly in Africa.

"Each year, several thousand South Africans come to the United States on seasonal H-2A visas as temporary agricultural workers. The visa was first introduced in 1986. Employers must pay for

flight tickets, housing, and food, and dish out a premium hourly wage. Persistent farm labour shortages across the United States have pushed visas up by 211% from 2011 to the 2021 fiscal year. South African hires, leaving behind a poor economy and high crime rates, have increased by 692% in that same period, and now make up the second-largest group of H-2A workers – exceeded only by Mexicans," he added.

According to a 2022 report released by the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI), South Africans with farming experience are in high demand in other parts of the world, particularly in the United States.

"In 2019, about 275 000 workers entered the United States on the H-2A programme that allows for farmers to hire migrant labour to assist with planting, cultivating, and harvesting. While more than 90% of these labourers arrive from Mexico, South Africans were next in demand. About 7 000 South Africans successfully obtained H-2A visas in 2019. As these are seasonal employees, these South Africans often 'learn, earn, and return'. However, as the number of South African citizens emigrating abroad continues to rise, farmers are among those selling up and leaving the country, with Canada and Australia popular destinations," according to the report.

CV Placements is one of several recruitment agencies that help South African labourers find work on farms in the United States. The company's Marieta Visagie says farmers in the United States rely heavily on the experience and skill of foreign workers.

Shantelle Francis, director of Recruiting for the USA, confirms that South African agricultural workers, such as tractor drivers, are in very high demand in the overseas labour market because of their determination, ability to work hard, and loyalty.

Addressing one of the Agri Indabas, Francis stated that much interest has been shown in tractor drivers and other general farm workers.



“It’s risen and we also receiving lots of inquiries as well as CVs from potential candidates. The challenge we face when screening some of the applicants is that a lot of people lie when it comes to their experiences as well as referees. We have a situation where some people had to be put on the next flight back home because they didn’t know how to drive a tractor or any other farm machinery,” she said.

Brain drain from poor countries is robbing those countries of the people they need to help them escape poverty. The allure of countries like the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the Netherlands has prompted an increasing number of individuals, even those from non-agricultural backgrounds, to pursue careers in farming abroad, leaving a void in the country’s farming sector.

Agricultural economist John Smith said the drain is a growing concern for the South African agricultural sector.

“Many skilled workers are enticed by the higher wages, better working conditions, and advanced technologies available in countries like the United States, Australia, and the Netherlands,” Smith added.

He pointed out that the advantages of such

moves for individuals are apparent. “Higher salaries and improved living standards abroad offer better opportunities for financial security and career growth. Additionally, the availability of state-of-the-art technologies and modern farming practices allows farmers to maximise productivity and efficiency.”

Whatever the advantages for the people leaving, the impact of the brain drain on the South African dairy sector cannot be ignored. The exodus of skilled workers has led to a shortage of expertise and experience, hindering the industry’s growth and development. Farm owners are having difficulty in finding qualified replacements and maintaining the same level of productivity.

“To mitigate the brain drain and its consequences, the South African dairy sector must focus on embracing automation and advanced technologies. Automation can help bridge the gap left by the departing skilled workers, reducing reliance on manual labour and increasing efficiency. By investing in innovative machinery and equipment, dairy farmers can enhance productivity and maintain competitiveness in the global market,” said Smith.

The brain drain in the South African farming sector creates significant difficulties but also provides an opportunity for growth and innovation.

“Overseas farms often provide better working conditions, including modern facilities, advanced equipment, and access to resources that enhance productivity. Skilled workers are drawn to these improved working environments that allow them to excel in their roles,” says Smith.

Another consideration is that those going abroad will have career growth opportunities and professional development is easier in countries with well-developed farming sectors. Skilled workers seek to advance their careers by gaining experience and knowledge in more advanced and competitive environments. 