

THIS LAND IS MY LAND

Against the myriad of stories about failed land reform projects - there are also many success stories where, with a little financial support initially, these farmers have gone on to expand their farming enterprises and are flourishing - using their own finance.

Jerico Shozi of Magimbela Farm in the Ugu District on the KwaZulu -Natal South Coast is one such cane grower.

In 2001, and with a R100 000 deposit which he obtained through LRAD, he purchased his first 460ha sugar cane farm from Illovo Sugar Limited. His biggest fear at that time was leaving a secure job to run his own farm. However, with 28 years farming experience, 18 of which he was a Section Manager with 60 staff reporting to him, he felt confident that he could take on this venture. He immediately got down to business, sought and took advice from wherever he could, attended the Junior and Senior Certificate Courses in Sugarcane Husbandry, participated in study groups and asked for assistance from Illovo's Extension Officer, as well as economic and technical advice from CANEGROWERS' staff. His hard work paid off and within nine years Jericho was able to pay off his R1.6 million debt for the farm.

During this time he also managed to purchase an additional 18 ha from a neighbour and in 2010 he purchased a further 160 ha from another neighbour – expanding his cane operation to 638 ha of which 247 ha is under cane. In a normal season, the farm cuts 12 500 tons cane per annum. The drought conditions experienced in the 2010/11 reduced this tonnage to 8 656 tons cane.

Jerico takes full responsibility for decision making on the farm and is assisted by one of his three sons and three supervisors. The most important changes affected in the farming business over the past five years include the establishment of a borehole, which is also used to assist the local community with water supply, the purchase of cattle to access areas which are inaccessible by tractor and the introduction of new plans for his farming operation.

A strong family man, his vision for the future is to grow his cane farming enterprise even further in order to leave a legacy for his family. Right now he has his sights set on another 140 ha neighbouring farm. Jerico's priorities for this season are to replant some 25 ha of fields that were impacted by drought in 2010/11 – estimated at R350 000, which will be in addition to his normal replanting programme. About 25 ha have been impacted by stool mortality. In anticipation of rising fuel costs and the impact this will have on fertilizer, he has already purchased all his fertiliser requirements for the 2011/12 season.

He is also a firm believer that farming is important in a socio-economic sense “as one only needs to look around the rural areas and see the impact farming has on rural communities and livelihoods”. He also believes there is a future for farmers as “without us, who will feed the nation?” As we stand and Jerico points out his farm boundaries, he spreads his arms wide and with a smile of satisfaction says, “I am making a difference in my community and meaningfully contributing to the financial and socio-economic wellbeing of my region and the country. I am in this venture for the long haul, am fully committed and dedicated to being sustainable and showing that black farmers can succeed. I have overcome many barriers to get where I am – my farm is well managed and I plan to keep on going and expanding. I believe I am a role model to my fellow cane growers.”