

# Food production and liberation

**M**r M.M. Mkhwanazi, the Senior Agricultural Officer for Mbedlane, and the Chairman of the KwaZulu Agricultural Extension Association, has a powerful philosophy: liberation only has real meaning, he says, if it is linked to self-sufficiency in food production.

Clarion Call interviewed Mr Mkhwanazi about food production in the context of development and liberation.

Outlining the Department of Agriculture and Forestry's programme in the Mbedlane region, Mr Mkhwanazi said he believed that with the worsening problem of inflation and unemployment, it was vitally important that the Department of Agriculture and Forestry did everything in its power to enable local communities to make the best use of the limited land available to them.

Food production projects in the Mbedlane region aim to increase the production of the staple crop maize as well as encourage people to produce several varieties of vegetables in community vegetable gardens.

Animal health officers also assist people to improve the overall management of livestock as, notwithstanding livestock losses caused by the drought, cattle still feature prominently in the social, economic and cultural lives of the people in the Mbedlane area.

The most commonly identified obstacles to progress in the work of Agricultural Extension Officers were identified by Mr Mkhwanazi as follows:

1. The lack of credit facilities to enable farmers to secure the necessary inputs for good crop yields.

The KwaZulu Finance Corporation does help those who farm on a larger scale — but the subsistence farmer with his one or two hectares also needs help.

2. As a result of the migrant labour system, Agricultural Extension Officers have to direct most of their efforts to those who remain behind in the rural areas.

These include the old people, who naturally tend to be more conservative and women who, although very receptive and enthusiastic especially with regard to vegetable gardening, struggle

with limited resources. Most of the community gardens involve women only.

The situation reflects a vicious circle in that the able bodied men seek work in the cities because the land cannot support them and yet the Agricultural Extension Officers cannot facilitate a greater commitment to improved agricultural practices because the household heads and decision makers are, for the most part, absent.

3. The combination of the drought and floods has to some extent caused people to lose confidence that there will be a worthwhile return on their investment in inputs such as seed, fertilizer and ploughing costs.



**Mr M.M. Mkhwanazi**

Mr Mkhwanazi elaborated: "After these few years of drought, people see farming as a risky undertaking. Right now the weather is bad, there has not been enough rain so some people have started ploughing and planting and others have not."

The problem is further compounded by the fact that many people who lost their cattle in the drought lost their traditional form of traction for ploughing.

Some people hired tractors but the escalating costs of fuel and widespread unemployment has put the hire of tractors for ploughing beyond the reach of many of the subsistence farmers.

The already bleak situation will be greatly exacerbated if sanctions and disinvestment become a reality. Asked what the consequences would be for a rural community like Nongoma if the disinvestment campaign succeeded, Mr Mkhwanazi responded: "It would be terrible because it is going to increase the number of people leaving jobs to come back home."

"This will have a tremendously disruptive effect on our development effort. The land cannot even support the present population and if all the retrenched workers come home and demand a piece of land, very serious problems will arise."

Clarion Call asked Mr Mkhwanazi for his comment on the views of some radical groupings who snidely remark that the Chief Minister and Inkatha "think they can liberate South Africa with cabbages."

Mr Mkhwanazi said he thought that the newer political groupings which are predominantly urban-based see political liberation as the "be-all and end-all."

"They have failed to take note of the misery and starvation in our neighbouring states. As field workers we come into contact with people from Swaziland and Mocambique. These people tell us of their difficulties and hardships even though they have independence. Their governments are very dependent on South Africa."

"Inkatha, as a self-organised people's movement, is well aware of the rural people's needs — we cannot talk about political liberation without addressing the people's basic needs for food."

"We are committed to self-help and self-reliance as a means of achieving total liberation and for this reason self-sufficiency in food production is a vital element of our strategy."

Asked if it was easier to work as an Agricultural Extension Officer within the framework of Inkatha than it had been as a civil servant merely doing a job of work, Mr Mkhwanazi added that his work had been greatly facilitated by Inkatha because "Inkatha people do understand self-help and basically we try to help people convert the basic principles of Inkatha into practical actions in the local community."