



# Women in agriculture: the story of Cebile Buthelezi

By Kayaletu **Sotsha**

## 1. Background

Very often you will come across statements such as “Agriculture is the backbone of rural livelihoods, particularly in developing countries” in agriculture literature. In addition, there is a general notion that when given power, equal rights and access to resources (such as land) and opportunities, women could reduce food insecurity. This notion arises from the acknowledgement that women are the backbone of development of rural economies and they are more involved in agricultural activities compared to men. Furthermore, women guarantee livelihoods in rural areas. In other words, it is believed that their greater effort in agricultural activities helps to guarantee self-sustenance as men often cover other needs such as health care, school fees, clothing and other essential stuff based on their financial capacity. This system can be attributed to the colonial system that created homelands and forced black people to supply labour in the mining and commercial agriculture sectors. Very often, men from homelands had to go and look for job opportunities, leaving women to be caregivers at home. As a result, women dominate subsistence agriculture in the rural areas and this

agriculture is viewed as the main alternative for rural women but it comes with better access to land and other resources such as capital. On the contrary, the smallholder and commercial agriculture sectors are dominated by men. This implies that there are imbalances in resources rights and ownership, where women do not have access and control over resources.



*Ms Cebile **Buthelezi** on her farm*

This is a story of Cebile Buthelezi, a 34-year-old woman from Vryheid, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province. Cebile grew up in a farming family in the KZN Province. She says she did not like doing farm activities when she was young because it felt like an abuse, having to wake up

around three or four o'clock in the morning. However, she grew to love farming as she learnt from her parents, as a result, she went to an agricultural school, the Owen Sithole College, to study animal production and home economics from 2008 to 2010. At the time she decided to go to school, she applied for farm land at the local Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR). She was called for an interview in September 2011 and got the farm in June 2012. Now she owns 1053 hectares (ha) farm in Louwsburg, which is situated in the Abaqulusi Local Municipality in the Zululand District Municipality. However, 350 ha of her land were cut out for three households (farm workers) that worked for the previous owner and lived on the farm. She still relies on these families as her employees because they have not been able to utilize their own 350 ha piece of land due to financial constraints. Therefore, the skills from the previous farm activities are not lost.

### 3. Farming enterprises

#### 3.1. Cattle production



*Cattle on the farm*

Cebile started operating the farm in 2012, doing small vegetable plots due to financial constraints. Fortunately, she received the Recap grant for beef cattle in 2014. She also used the support to acquire assets such as tractor, irrigation system and fencing. She started with 50 cattle

and her herd currently stands at 70 cattle. The markets for cattle are abattoirs in Vryheid and the informal market consisting of people from neighbouring communities. The sales do not exceed ten cattle per annum and are often aimed to generate extra income to complement vegetables production. Like many farmers in the country, she suffered a loss of stock during the severe drought that hit the country recently to which she lost ten cattle. In addition, she lost six cattle between 2014 and 2017 due to theft. Her land for cattle is divided into 3 camps, one big camp of 300 ha and two small camps. Sometimes, she purchases the feed to supplement the grazing camps, particularly in winter. Her stock is currently serviced by 5 bulls for breeding. She manages the breeding such that the mating takes place around December for births to take place around September. This is a strategy to ensure that calves come after winter as she does not have enough cash to purchase sufficient quantities of feed. When asked about her plans for cattle breeding, she says her passion is not on cattle but she was obliged to start with this enterprise as recap was specific to it. Therefore, she has no plan to increase her herd at the moment.

#### 3.2. Vegetables production



*Cabbages*

Although she received support for cattle, her passion is in vegetables production. As a result, she still continues with her vegetables and even going stronger. In addition,



to selling cattle to support vegetables production, she also leased 30 ha of her land to Just Veggies in an attempt to increase her financial muscle. Not only she used this opportunity to raise cash, but she also took part in Just Veggies' skills development programmes to build capacity in vegetables production. She focuses on Spinach (2 ha), Cabbage (6 ha), Broccoli, Butternut and Onions (1 ha) – the total area for vegetables is 10 ha. She indicates that there is capacity for growth because she currently has 60 ha that could be under irrigation. She currently sells her vegetables to retailers (Boxer Super Store and Spar) and Hawkers in Vryheid as well as the individuals in the neighbouring communities. However, there are no contract agreements with the two retail outlets and she feels this as a challenge as there are no guarantees of selling her produce and therefore the prices are not fixed. She further indicates that her plans for vegetables are to focus more on potatoes and sweet potatoes, and hopefully affiliate to Potatoes South Africa. She is currently seeking information from the industry in this regard.

#### **4. Contribution to the local economy**

She currently employs seven permanent workers and 20 – 25 seasonal workers. In addition, she receives

students who come to do practical, from Owen Sithole (3), Mangosuthu College (2) and Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) (1) over a three year period. However, there are no proper arrangements and incentives for these relationships, as a result, the students do not get any income during their stay on the farm as she could only provide accommodation on the farm.

#### **5. Achievements**

In 2016, Cebile was a runner-up at the Commercial Entrepreneur Award that was held in Pietermaritzburg.

#### **6. Training Acquired**

She received training on fire fighting – this was organized by the local DRDLR. This year (2017), she attended the Making Markets Matter (MMM) Workshop in the Western Cape – this was organized by the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC) in collaboration with MMM Inc. She indicated that she gained a lot of knowledge and reaped several benefits from this workshop. These include:

- Marketing



*Transport collecting the produce from the Lofika Farm*

Transport collecting the produce from the Lofika Farm

- Financial management, including budgeting and re-investment in the farm business to enhance growth
- Networking with other farmers from other Provinces of South Africa. Here she highlights the engagement she had with the overall winner of the Female Farmer of the year Award of 2016, Ms Venecia Janse of the Western Cape. The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries took an initiative to honour and appreciate the contribution of women to agricultural production in the country, through a Female Entrepreneur Award (FEA). This initiative dates back some seventeen years and aims to encourage and increase the participation of women, youth and people with disabilities in the agriculture sector. What happens is that each year each Province nominates candidates for FEA and picks the winner. Then an overall winner is picked from the Provincial winners. In 2015, Ms Julia Shungube from Mpumalanga received this Award. Cebile is happy to have interacted with such farmers and she is still keeping in touch with them on agriculture-related matters.



Cebile **Buthelezi** during the Making Markets Matter Workshop of 2017

## 7. Support

She receives support from the local DRDLR and the Department of Agriculture. The latter assists with soil samples, soil demarcation and markets for surplus, where necessary. She also receives support from her parents, who she assists on their farm from time to time in their farming activities. Her brothers also come to work on the farm during school holidays and she pays them and supports them with their school needs.

## 8. Challenges

- Not having contracts with the markets. This brings a lot of uncertainty with regards to price and quantities to be taken by the market because there are many suppliers
- Lack of a cold storage truck to supply a market in Johannesburg
- Finance to expand vegetables production
- Low respect from the community and workers. She feels that being a female and young, people often take advantage and take her for granted
- Packing machines to use in the packing shed
- Switching from livestock to vegetable production which she prefers
- Vandalization of the fence
- Stealing of vegetables
- Veld fires during winter
- Trespassing – livestock from neighbouring communities come and graze on her farm

## 9. Advice to other women and youth

- They should not let access to land be an issue in the short term – do with what you have and develop it over time
- No need to jump at commercial level – transition can be slow
- Agriculture is life and offers opportunities
- Change of mindset – learn to do things for yourself