

ASSESSMENT OF THE FETSA TLALA CROPPING PROGRAMME IN RAYMOND MHLABA LOCAL MUNICIPALITY, EASTERN CAPE

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Introduction

The Fetsa Tlala Food Production Initiative is government's flagship food security programme. According to official documentation,

“Fetsa Tlala is an integrated government framework that seeks to promote food security and address structural causes of food insecurity, which continue to perpetuate inequality and social exclusion. Fetsa Tlala is aimed at more than just creating a food secure country for all South Africans, but to also to eradicate hunger. It is therefore an overarching framework to maximise synergy between the different strategies and programmes of government and civil society.” (DAFF 2013, page 1)

The programme places an emphasis on empowering those who have an interest in farming, in particular by providing them with the tools and resources necessary for crop production. The programme has a goal of putting 1 million hectares of land under production around the country by the 2018/19 production season, most of which would be under-utilised land within the former homelands and on land reform projects.

Within Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality, Fetsa Tlala is the most visible form of support for crop farming. For the 2014/15 production season, there were 8 Fetsa Tlala projects in the municipality covering about 300 hectares. These projects are designed in more or less the same manner: i) a community is identified that has a reasonably large block of arable land; ii) community members are encouraged to join the programme, which means making their fields available, making an own contribution (which in 2014/15 was R1800 per hectare), and forming a group; iii) government contracts a service provider to undertake the land preparation, planting, and perhaps spraying; and iv) the participants harvest the crop and then determine what to do with it. In the 2014/15 season, all the projects in Raymond Mhlaba LM involved Roundup-Ready yellow maize.

Because of Fetsa Tlala's unique status in the area, the Raymond Mhlaba Farmers Association, together with the Agricultural and Rural Development Research Institute (ARDRI) of the University of Fort Hare, decided to conduct a small study of it. The study examines the perceptions of participants of 4 of the 8 projects in the municipality regarding the benefits of participation and related matters. The 4 projects that were selected are located in different parts of the municipality: namely Tyatyora in the Healdtown area, northeast of Fort Beaufort; Ganda, in the Gaga Traditional Council area to the west of Alice; Msobomvu, in Tyhume valley; and Xukwane, southeast of Middledrift.

The method used was focus group discussions involving a subset of project members. The focus group discussions were held on the 17th and 21st of September, with around 8 or 10 participants in each, including both women and men. The focus group discussions followed a

‘discussion path’ that the researchers drafted in advance. The summary of the discussions that follows is organised according to the main questions from this discussion path.

Summary of the focus group discussions

1. ‘When did you first become involved with the Cropping programme?’

One of the groups reported starting in 2010, another in 2011, three in 2012, and one in 2014. Strictly speaking the earlier ones were not Fetsa Tlala projects, since Fetsa Tlala began only in 2013, however it appears to have been a very similar programme run by provincial government.

2. ‘What was your motivation behind joining the programme?’

Various reasons were expressed for joining the programme, but the common notions were to alleviate poverty, earn income, put food on the table, and feed their livestock. Some participants also wanted to put their farming expertise to work again, while others saw it as a way of keeping busy. At one of the projects, discussion participants felt that the programme was similar to a pre-1994 farming initiatives implemented by the Ciskei administration, from which they benefited while growing up. Numerous participants mentioned that the promise of government support was a big motivation to get farming again.

3. ‘How were the members chosen and what were the requirements to participate?’

The requirements were first and foremost that one had fields, was interested, was prepared to make a contribution of R1800, and cleaned their fields. In one community, other parties that were interested but who had no fields could borrow from those who had fields but were not using them; they then had to clean the fields, which signalled how motivated they was to be part of the programme. In another village, the contribution of R1800 was covered by a loan from the Eastern Cape Rural Development Agency (ECRDA).

In one village, the people decided to run the programme as a co-op, for which they introduced a joining fee of R50. This money was then used to contribute towards the farmer contribution required by the programme. Another village had the same idea, but made the joining fee R60. The discussion participants in one village mentioned that they also had to provide their own fencing.

4. ‘When you first joined the programme, what were your initial thoughts on how it would benefit you and the community in which you leave?’

Project members from across the projects expected that the programme would enable them to re-establish themselves as farmers, earn a profit through selling to the market, and create employment opportunities in their respective communities, including for the youth. Some discussants mentioned that their participation would help them put food on the table, feed their livestock, and educate their children. Discussants from one project stressed that they wished to be established farmers with their own working tools and tractors that solely

belonged to them. Discussants from another project saw the potential for making a profit. The state of the land and climate was also a benefit they identified, because they believe that farming changes the landscape in such a way that the land becomes richer.

5. *'Would you say you have gained anything from being part of the cropping programme?'*

All of the discussants indicated that they gained from their participation in the project, with members of one group mentioning that they have managed to put some savings in their bank account in preparation for the next season, and members of another groups stating that from the proceeds they have been able to implement other initiatives such as a small garden for the local crèche. Others mentioned that indeed there have been some job opportunities created for community members at harvest time.

Part of the maize harvest of one of the project groups



However, all the groups also emphasised that the benefits were far less than what was anticipated. This falling short of expectations was in some cases due to poor rains, though this in itself would not have been such a great problem if the planting had not been so late. Most of the concerns related to how the programme was run, e.g. “Government did not make good on their promises; the tractor did a rushed job, the ploughing was not done properly to such an extent that we have now become discouraged”.

6. *'What assistance was provided to you from the various institutions associated with the programme in order to ensure your targets were met?'*

All of the discussants acknowledged the significant amount of support received from government (i.e. DRDAR, DRDLR, ECRDA, or some combination of these), for the tractor services and inputs.

Beyond this, some discussions reported assistance from their Chiefs, not monetary support but help in obtaining certain resources and equipment, or providing motivation letters when they needed something from the local municipality.

Discussants from one project received assistance from World Vision for fencing. They also mentioned the support of local extension staff, especially on how to use pesticides, and received information on climate change and agro-ecology from a local NGO, who also provided training on financial management.

As mentioned above, members of one project also received assistance from the ECRDA in the form of loans to cover the cost of the R1800 per hectare own contribution. However, this particular assistance later turned sour, in that discussants claim that their poor harvest was such that they have been unable to repay this loan, and ECRDA has been threatening to take legal action.

It is notable that the assistance of extension officers was cited by only one of the groups; extension officers barely featured in the discussions with the other groups.

7. *‘Would you say this was sufficient, or do these institutions need to do more?’*

The groups concurred that the assistance was not enough. The most common complaint was that the programme enabled only a share of the fields to be ploughed. For example, the members of one project had between them 100 hectares, whereas only 50 were planted, which meant that community members whose fields were not planted had to be included somehow so that they could also benefit.

Another group mentioned that the water situation is a major issue, in that they wish they could plant throughout the year but cannot do so when it’s dry. They would also appreciate more fencing and a shelter to store their produce, and would like help with financial matters and bookkeeping. One group mentioned that they wish the Chiefs would do more to maintain order in the fields, for example in relation to problems with others’ livestock (see below).

8. *‘Would you say that the farmer contribution required by the program is reasonable?’*

Discussants agreed that the farmers’ contribution of R1800 per hectare is too heavy; most community members are unemployed, while this is still a very large sum for those who receive an old age pension. Members of one group mentioned that they were forced to borrow money from friends and family in order to cover their own contribution. (This is apart from the community where members borrowed from the ECRDA.) However, one group acknowledged that for three years they had not had to make any own contribution at all, and this allowed them to save up towards the own contribution requirement when it was introduced. Others had some leftover fertiliser from the previous year which would defray some of the expenses in this coming year.

As difficult as the R1800 was this past season, farmers were distressed about how they would be able to contribute more in the coming season, which appears to be the intention of government. Adding to the distress is the lack of clarity as to what exactly is expected now.

9. ‘Are you happy with the role the community as a whole plays in the programme?’

On this question two of the discussion groups expressed frustration, in that their projects have experienced a great deal of theft. In one discussion group, the participants said that community members who are not part of the project seem to feel entitled to help themselves to the harvest because they see it as a government initiative which should benefit the whole community.

Three of the groups expressed unhappiness with how community members allow their livestock to feed on the crops.

The fourth group was quite different: they reported no qualms with the broader community, with whom they have a good working relationship. The discussants from this group even expressed appreciation for how community members help in ensuring that their livestock do not go into the fields, and for the support they provide by buying the project’s produce.

10. ‘What problems if any have you encountered under the programme?’

Discussants felt that the contractors were a big problem. Probably the biggest concern was that the contractors had a tendency to come late for the land preparation and planting. It was felt that this was one of the main reasons for the poor harvests. The other main concern was the perceived poor quality of their work. For instance, one group said that the agriculture department promised that the contractor would come to spray for weeds, which they did, but the weeds were not eradicated, leading the members to wonder if the contractors were maybe just spraying water on their fields. Another group mentioned a similar problem with ineffective spraying, but also disliked how the tractors worked at night so that the project members could not properly monitor the work that they did. Another discussant group did interact with the contractors, but said that the contractors “rarely listen to advice from the members, they just continue to do their rushed job”. One group went as far as to hire a local tractor to re-do some of the work which the government contractor did so poorly.

The tractor used by one of the government contractors, and the flatbed truck that brought it to site



The perception that the contractors did a ‘rushed job’ was a common one, and was ascribed to the fact that the contractor had to get to their next project as soon as possible, and therefore “could not be bothered to do a proper job”. The fact that the contractor was from far away and unknown to them, meant that when the work was not done properly, the project members “could not even go and complain to these people”. The contractor who served one of the projects came from Somerset East, over 140 kilometres away, obliging the contractor to use a flatbed truck in order to transport the tractor to and from site.

Other concerns expressed by the discussants were: the lack of choice as to crop and crop variety; the use of chemical fertilisers; the lack of proper training so that the farmers had a better idea what was going on; the arduous nature of harvesting by hand, in particular the manual removal (shelling) of the grains from the cob; and the lack of a proper market at which to sell the harvest. Regarding the choice of seeds, discussants disliked the fact that the seed they were provided under the programme could not be used for planting the next crop, i.e. because that is the nature of much GM seed.

Overall, discussants felt the R9000 per hectare cost was excessive, meaning among other things that there was little chance the programme could be sustained, especially as government intended to reduce its share of support in favour of a larger share from project members.

11. ‘Would you be able to suggest any remedies for the above-mentioned problems?’

The discussants from the different groups were in agreement that reliance on outside contractors should be stopped. All of the groups suggested that local tractor owners be hired instead, although two of the groups would have preferred even more having their own tractors.

Other suggestions included training on different crop farming methods, training regarding different seed choices, more support for harvesting (whether mechanised or in the form of hired labour), and assistance with finding a market.

The opportunity to plant other crops was seen by one group as a means of reducing the risk of relying only on maize. All in all, discussants wished to make more use of their traditional methods, such as use of manure rather than chemical fertilisers, use of open-pollinated varieties rather than GM seed, and inter-planting rather than mono-cropping.

12. ‘Do you feel that the programme was well planned?’

The discussants all acknowledged improved production relative to what they had before, but nonetheless felt that the programme was poorly planned. The main way in which they expressed their concern about the planning was in terms of the lack of consultation and information. Project members feel they should have been consulted in order to determine what they need and want, which would have contributed to a more successful programme. Lack of information was such that farmers were unsure about some of the decisions taken on their behalf, not necessarily that they were in disagreement with these decisions.

The other main concern regarding planning was the one mentioned above in respect of late planting and rushed work of the contractors, "... because the contractors themselves are chasing deadlines so not much care is taken when ploughing and spraying the fields".

A Fetsa Tlala maize field, 26 November 2014



13. 'Were you able to communicate sufficiently or to your satisfaction with the people in charge?'

To different degrees, the discussants felt that communication with programme/project implementers was either absent or difficult. Some project members did interact with the contractors, but as stated above, once the contractors left they were out of contact. The general feeling was that project members did not know who to approach when they had a problem; in the words of one discussant, "promises were made to them when they started work on the programme, but once those promises were broken they had no way of following up." Some project members approached local extension officers, but seemingly to little effect.

There was however one project in which communication was better and in particular thanks to the local extension officer. When the group used its own money to hire a local tractor owner to re-do some of the work that the government contractor failed to do properly, they were eventually refunded by the government.

14. 'Would you say that you are presented with sufficient market opportunities?'

Marketing was a problem for all of the groups, though to different degrees. All of the groups managed to sell maize directly to households in their own or nearby communities. None managed to sell to formal markets, although they were aware of possible buyers, such as Umtiza Co-op. In the course of one of the focus group discussions, discussants joked about the possible market destinations mentioned by government, such as Elliot and China.

Due to the fact that most of the sales were local, prices tended to be poor. One of the communities was approached by a man from a nearby town who wanted to buy all of their maize, but who offered a price that was even worse, so the project group declined.

Discussion and conclusion

In general, each of the groups felt that they benefitted from their participation in Fetsa Tlala/ Cropping program. Members were able to increase their maize production, derive some income from the sale of maize, and have more feed on hand for their livestock.

The 4 projects are very similar in most respects, although members of one of the projects appear somewhat more satisfied all around than members of the other three projects. However, all of the groups felt that they benefitted less than they expected, and attribute this to the way in which the programme is run. Particular concerns include:

- The expense of participating.
- The overall expense of the programme.
- Lack of opportunity for project members to contribute to key decisions, such as what varieties of maize to plant, what crops to plant and what technology to use.
- Reliance on contractors who come from far away, rush to finish the job, do poor quality work, and have no accountability to the project members.
- Late planting.
- Lack of support to develop skills and knowledge, for example with respect to fertiliser use.
- Absence of a good strategy or support for marketing.

This is not to say that all of the expectations of focus group participants are reasonable. For example, a number of participants wish to be provided with irrigation, which in many cases is not viable or feasible. (Having said that, Raymond Mhlaba Municipality has some water resources that are under-exploited, such as the Binfield Dam, from which very few small-scale farmers benefit at all.) Two groups expressed a wish to have their own tractors, however the experience from elsewhere is that group projects are often incapable of maintaining tractors in operational condition.

While this research did not seek to establish the economic returns to Fetsa Tlala, the high cost and poor outcomes of Fetsa Tlala should be put into perspective. As mentioned above, the stated cost per hectare of Fetsa Tlala cropping projects is R9000 per hectare, whereas at present local maize farmers in Raymond Mhlaba LM spend around R3000 per hectare, inclusive of tractor hire. While the 2014/15 production season was generally a poor one for Raymond Mhlaba's dry land crop farmers, the yields on Fetsa Tlala projects were especially bad. The best performing of the projects we interviewed produced 443 bags on 40 hectares, which is less than half a ton per hectare. The approximate purchase price of this quantity of maize would have been about R62 000, however the production cost at R9000 per hectare was R360 000. Meanwhile, despite the generally dry conditions in Nkonkobe this past year, other small-scale maize farmers were getting yields that were at least 60% to 80% higher.

In the upcoming season, government is saying that it intends to reduce its own contribution from R7200 to R3200 per hectare, while project members' contribution is meant to rise accordingly. Given the perception among project members that the previous R1800 was high

relative to the modest benefits they derived, it is difficult to say what will happen. It seems unlikely that many farmers will not be able to afford the implied contribution of R5800 per hectare, nor would it make much economic sense for them if they could.

In conclusion, Fetsa Tlala appears to be seeking to address a real need felt by local farmers, however farmers wish that the programme could be operated differently, in particular because it is far too top-down for their liking. Together with information regarding what appears to be the excessive expense of the programme, it would seem that alternative, more affordable approaches could be found. Together we can do more.

Reference

DAFF (Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries). 2013. "Fetsa Tlala: Integrated Food Production Initiative," downloaded from <http://www.nda.agric.za/>.