

# The Farmers' Chronicles

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## Building Value from Data: An Increasing Role for Women in Agricultural Development

Quality data is embedded in every agricultural development programme, in every agricultural sector report and in every agricultural policy. For Mahlatse Makaleng, Statistician in the Directorate: Statistics and Economic Analysis at the national Department of Agriculture (DoA), converting data into usable information is far more than a technical exercise, it is a means of improving South Africa's agricultural sector.

As we celebrate International Women's Day globally, Mahlatse's career path is an example of the growing number of women who are entering the fields of research, economics, policy analysis and statistics who will shape the

future of agriculture. At the DoA, Mahlatse analyses large datasets and translates uninterpreted numbers into usable information to help inform decision-making processes, and to guide policy and programmes that will assist in the improvement of the stability and viability of food production and agricultural development.

Increasingly, the impacts of climate variability, globalisation and technological advances on agriculture will require high-quality data to enable informed decision-making about the livelihoods of farmers and rural communities. Professionals such as Mahlatse play an important function in ensuring that decisions





affecting the livelihoods of farmers and rural communities are made using credible data. For Mahlatse, “Statistics” is not just creating spreadsheets full of numbers, it is about identifying trends, revealing problems and creating solutions that will enable us to achieve sustainable agricultural development.

One assignment early in Mahlatse’s career changed her perception of her job as being more than just a routine technical task. During an assignment that included extensive hours of data analysis and reporting, she thought it was a typical technical assignment. Upon completing the assignment, however, she realised that the data analysis had greatly assisted her colleagues in streamlining their projects and had provided them with information to plan within the sector.

This realisation changed the way she viewed her role. Rather than viewing the assignment as simply another task, she began to view the technical activities that were happening behind the scenes as having a potential impact on the decision-making process and ultimately supporting agricultural development. This heightened her cognisance of the fact that each dataset analysed, and each report produced adds to a larger system that supports both farmers and the agricultural economy. Traditionally, agriculture was seen as an area relating to farming and the physical aspects of farming, however, the agricultural industry is now increasingly

influenced by science, technology and research. Therefore, women are becoming more prominent in many of these areas and are adding expertise in areas such as economics, data analysis, research and policy development. The increasing presence of women in technical roles is a significant shift in the agricultural industry. This shift suggests that agricultural development is dependent on a variety of skill sets and perspectives, and that enabling women in technical roles will allow organisations working in this industry to better support its development.

Mahlatse’s career is an example of the ways in which women are shaping the landscape of the agricultural industry. This is not limited to traditional leadership positions but includes specialised work that guides how the industry develops and responds to emerging issues and challenges. International Women’s Day has been celebrated since the early 20th century when women across the globe demanded equal rights, fair working conditions, and greater participation in the public realm.

Today, International Women’s Day is recognised as an opportunity to acknowledge the accomplishments of women and to draw attention to the need to develop additional opportunities for women in all aspects of society. Developing the skills and abilities of women in agriculture through education, professional development and leadership opportunities is crucial to establishing a more inclusive and



sustainable agricultural industry. Professionals like Mahlatse are part of a growing number of women who contribute to the development of agricultural policy, build the capacity of organisations working in agriculture and provide support for the long-term sustainability of the agricultural industry. For Mahlatse, professional growth is a direct result of her commitment to ongoing learning, collaboration and a sense of purpose in the work she performs. She encourages her colleagues and those interested in becoming professionals to continue their commitment to developing their skills and recognising the value of their contributions.

Mahlatse Makaleng's words for success are straightforward and motivating: "Find the reason you want to be in agriculture, keep learning and know that no matter how small your part of the process is, it will make a big difference." In addition to being an inspirational example of someone who has defined her own career by way of perseverance, determination, hard work, and a need to continuously learn, she represents a role model for women developing their careers in the agricultural sector of South Africa.

The story of Mahlatse Makaleng serves as an example of how the growth and development of the agricultural sector in South Africa is not only done in the fields or on the farms, but also in the office spaces, research facilities, and analytical areas where information is translated into actions that help support both the farmer and the development of the food systems in South

Africa. To include and empower women in all these areas is essential, and should be celebrated throughout the year, but most importantly, the continued growth and development of the agricultural sector in South Africa, should be supported through the inclusion of diverse individuals with many different perspectives.

