

## Sandie Phakathi – Agricultural Economics



It is often argued that agriculture is the biggest source of employment in rural areas, and it is the key to a successful economy. However, South Africa has fallen short of utilising this age-old industry to dig rural communities out of abject poverty.

Sandie Phakathi is a young scholar from KwaZulu Natal who has pledged her academic life to finding innovative ideas, interrogating existing models and ensuring that the agricultural industry becomes lucrative for both big and small farmers.

She holds a Masters degree in Agricultural Economics from the University of KwaZulu-Natal where she was also a Research Assistant. Having spent a fair amount of time with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Sappi Forestry department of Risk and Operations, she is convinced that more research is needed.

As a lecturer in Economics 101 and Public Finance 313, Sandile is extending her research into the business side of agriculture. Her PhD research is focused on institutional innovations for improved water security among smallholder farmers. This focus combines her research interests of Economics of water use, Agricultural development, Institutional Economics and Environmental Economics.

"I enjoy these subjects as they speak directly to the need for a more basic understanding of production that is profitable as well as the role of government in private farming," she enthuses.

Her passion for grassroots level development started in high school where she excelled in agriculture, but it lacked the economic component and was not a popular subject among her peers.

"Agriculture is always optional for South African citizens, especially as a career option. Most people get involved only after they have exhausted all other possibilities. They do not have a clear understanding of the many fields of study and research available," she lamented.

According to her, smallholder farmers produce up to 80% of our food, however the emerging ones that are running farms with government assistance still have low production, an indication that lack of skills and knowledge is still a disadvantage.

"There are hundreds of uneducated farmers who struggle to engage with modern and advanced techniques of food production. I want to help because we have a lot of land that ought to be utilised to its full capability for the benefit of the entire country".

Her involvement in the nGAP will address the shortage of agricultural academics, a gap created by the closure of agricultural colleges in the 1990s.

"The programme speaks to transformation, not only in the higher education sector but in society," said Sandile.