

Getting started on a new farming project

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The primary reason for one to set up a business of any kind is to realise profits. Careful planning, judicious and methodical execution of the plan always precedes the successful the realisation of good returns for every dollar, time and effort invested in the business. The farming business is no exception to this rule and like any other venture it ascribes religiously to these tenets. Whilst it remains true that there is money in farming, it should however be borne in mind that the money is only extracted by those individuals who carefully approach the farming business from the correct angle, with the right attitude and readiness to invest a good measure of patience. The discussion that follows hereafter seeks to single out some of the major considerations that a new farmer should look into when starting a new farming business.

Land Size & Tenure

The maximum extent of the farm in question has a lot of bearing on the type of farming as well the nature of projects possible on that piece of land. For instance if one has been offered a 50ha plot they can never dream of doing commercial beef breeding because the land size is inhibiting. The ownership status or security of tenure also dictate the direction one can/not take in terms of their farming decisions. It is improbable that one embarks on erecting such expensive infrastructure as state of the art dairy parlours at a farm which is not their own, unless the terms of tenure specify of some degree of compensation for permanent farm developments. The length of lease /ownership is key in planning especially where physical developments with huge capital outlay such as dam construction are involved.

Agro-Ecological Region

it is without any shred of doubt that the decisions on what crops to grow as well a scale of operation is heavily influenced by the climatic conditions which obtain at the farm in question. It is only in a few cases that exemptions can be talked of, such as in the case where greenhouses enable the manipulation of the microclimate do we find crops growing outside their expected regions. Agro-ecological region under which the farm falls dictate what can be done or not done given the role played by climate on the agriculture with respect to ambient temperature and rainfall in case of rain fed operations or even adequacy of the same to harness for irrigation or livestock rearing purposes.

Soils, Vegetation, & Water Resources

The soil type is also important in determining the enterprise that one can embark on for example sandy soils will support the cultivation of tobacco whilst deep well drained loams will suit such crops as potatoes. It is very difficult to ignore such factors. Vegetation type has greater bearing for livestock enterprises with respect to browseable herbage (e.g. acacia species) as well as whether the grassveld is sweet veld or sour veld. Vegetation is also handy in identifying suitability of land for various uses as the type of vegetation can easily be used to tell the soil characteristics in that area. For instance the presence of water-berry trees can be used as a beacon to signify a high water table and land that is prone to water logging. Such a sward can thus be avoided especially if the field being established is meant for crops that require well drained soils. Assessment of the adequacy of surface water resources and the potential for harnessing it from other sources is necessary during the planning phase. This is so because if one discovers that water is so limiting, they may explore possibilities of drilling boreholes. If that does not avail enough water still, then one is forced to consider farming enterprises that do not require copious quantities of water.

Choose The Right Enterprise(S)

Guided by what your farm can do for you as seen above, a farmer can then go ahead and choose an enterprise or more. One can choose to integrate, practice mixed farming or specialise depending with the array of possibilities at their property.

Technical Feasibility

Once the enterprise(s) have been chosen, the farmer has to assess whether there is requisite managerial expertise to oversee the type of venture he has got in mind. If that is not the case then he should consider ways of hiring people with the necessary managerial clout to see the venture to fruition. For instance suppose one has chosen to do flowers, such projects call for trained and experienced managers. In other cases one can choose to rely on consultants. Always ensure that there are ready experts around to consult from. Apart from management it is important to ensure that one identifies their sources of manpower. If the enterprise chosen is labour intensive (e.g. tobacco or cotton production) it is recommended to assess if there is a ready population in the vicinity to draw your labour requirements from. In addition to that the farmer should at this stage undertake all the necessary production planning. S/he should come up with the plans detailing the production cycles, estimated levels of production, the requirements in terms of inputs etc. This stage is critical in that it is meant to assist the farmer to put everything into perspective so s/he can picture each cycle from start to the end with clarity at each production stage. S/he also evaluates some of the critical factors such as the accessibility of the farm in terms of road network, proximity to markets, service centres and other amenities. These factors do have a lot of bearing in success or failure of any proposed venture hence need careful scrutinizing.

Financial Implications

Having taken all the considerations outlined above into account, it remains for one to look critically into the financial implications of the chosen enterprise. The farmer has to put into perspective the amount of money needed to effect the relevant farm developments. Not only that it remains imperative to also consider the amount of money needed to purchase such equipment that support

production on the farm as tractors, ploughs, combines and so forth. It is recommended that one considers the financial requirements for the procurement of the requisite inputs necessary for the execution of at least one cycle of the chosen enterprise for instance enough seed, chemicals and fertilisers for the whole agricultural season.

Marketing

One problem that is faced by producers today is marketing of their produce. A good harvest is not good enough in business if one cannot push it through the market. It is very pertinent that one identifies or better still secures their market before they even start production. It is equally important for the farmer to engage an expert who can advise on the market dynamics and trends. This is instrumental in timing of the production cycle in such a manner that the farmer avoids entering the market when there is a glut of that particular produce. A case in point is that of Nyamandlovu farmers in Umguzu district, who in 2013 experienced a glut of cabbages to extent of making record losses. This can be avoided by sound forward planning. Future predictions of market performance are also essential for one to avoid building their business around a temporary demand. Here I am alluding to the sustainable market which can be constantly absorb produce for a desirable period of time. Picture a scenario whereby one puts up greenhouses for cut-flower production and the market fizzles out after three months of production -what a loss. It therefore pays to consult experts to help with long term forecasts of market trends.

Physical Farm Planning/Land Use Planning

Depending on one's competence or lack of it the recruitment of experts to assist with the physical planning of the farm can be valuable. This alludes to the division of the farm into blocks for a variety of land uses. This procedure involves assessment of the arable pieces of land and earmarking these for various cropping activities. Setting aside areas for future developments such as small earth dam construction in line with the farmer's vision. Not only that it also involves such activities as the demarcation of grasslands into paddocks preferably of equal carrying capacities. Areas not arable are then left out to cater for farm buildings, sheds, tobacco barns and housing compounds. These can be the rocky unworkable patches. Such areas can also be used for establishment of such things as the farm's woodlot.

Farm Developments

Using the outcome of the land use planning, farm developments can then be commissioned in earnest. These are activities such as sinking of boreholes, construction of such infrastructure as dip-tanks, roads, small earth dams, weirs, tobacco barns, green houses, farm servants quarters and the like, assuming that these were not in existence prior. However laying out of critical production infrastructure should take top priority. By this I mean that in the case of there are so many developments to be effected, one has to prioritise them in order that the most critical is addressed first, whilst the rest can be looked into as and when time and resources permit.

Equipment & Inputs Procurement

After the establishment of key farm infrastructure, the equipment and inputs should then be procured. This is tactical in that one can at this point comfortably order their 30tons of fertiliser knowing full well that they have the storage space to keep it safely away from thieves and weather

elements. Equipment needed at the farm can be quite a list, hence prioritising should also be done in this instance. Key pieces of equipment should be procured first and the remaining ones can be bought in later as the business grows.

Recruitment Of Personnel

With all the infrastructure and equipment in place what remains is for one to recruit the right people to carry out the project. It is prudent that one finds the correct people with the right skills and experience should the whole thing be a success. In modern farming any serious farmer should seek the services of a qualified and experienced manager unless s/he has the same competence in the subject matter. One should see to it that they have enough of the requisite manpower in each department before production commencement so as to avoid stalling of production due to labour constraints.

After going through all the stages outlined above, nothing stops in your way , all is set, so go ahead and produce for your family , community and the nation at large. After all has been said and done, given that this is a business check out to see if you are making any profits, if not don't instantaneously decide to quit rather be patient, take time to learn from your experiences and get mentorship from those who have been successful in that trade. In order to register success in farming one must be ready to learn and this takes tonnes of patience.

For all questions and comments: email philemonburuzi@gmail.com. Responses will be provided within the shortest possible time.

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