

# Agroecology project offers hope for unemployed youth in KwaZulu-Natal

**W**ith youth unemployment levels in South Africa currently sitting at a staggering 46,1%, according to Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey for the first quarter of 2025, the urgency to find sustainable solutions has never been greater.

In rural KwaZulu-Natal, non-profit organisation (NPO) Thanda is expanding its Food Security & Economic Development (FSED) Initiative with a renewed focus: supporting the youth to build dignified, sustainable livelihoods through agroecology.

Thanda has been running community-based farming programmes in rural South Africa for the past decade. In 2024 alone, participating farmers earned R3,6 million in direct income, money that not only supports their families but also circulates through and uplifts their communities.

Now, Thanda is doubling down on supporting young people at a time when KwaZulu-Natal has seen the largest provincial employment decline in the country, with 104 000 fewer people employed in the first quarter of 2025 compared with the previous quarter.

Thanda's youth-focused initiative equips young people with tools, skills, infrastructure and a mentorship programme to grow both food and income, right where they live. While farming has often been seen as work for the elderly, this programme is

reshaping the narrative: young people are stepping into roles as producers, entrepreneurs, and community leaders.

## YOUTH CASE STUDY FARM

As part of Thanda's long-term strategy, the FSED Initiative aims to establish a Youth Case Study Farm: a 4ha site that, pending the necessary funding, could serve as a practical training ground for eight young farmers, each responsible for managing a half-hectare plot.

With guidance from experienced Thanda mentors, youth farmers will experiment with different techniques, refine their business models and gain first-hand experience in managing and scaling agroecological operations. The farm will also serve as a visible and accessible space where the community can see what success in farming looks like.

Once the case study farm is operational and has the right collaborative partnerships in place, Thanda will support the replication of youth farms in other areas, focusing on scaling group-managed farms from one hectare to five.

Achieving this level of growth will require significant infrastructure investment, including irrigation systems, fencing and reliable access to water during the dry seasons.

## FUTURE SUPPORT

Over the next five years, Thanda aims to support 1 350 smallholder and household farmers, with at least 100 of them

being youth aged 18 to 35. By 2030, the organisation expects 20% of all supported farmers to reach entrepreneurial-level livelihoods, with year-on-year growth in production of at least 15%.

By 2045, Thanda foresees that 40% of programme participants will be youth. That translates to an increase from around 30 youth enrolled in 2024 to 250 youth actively earning income through farming by 2045.

"When we first started the FSED Initiative 10 years ago, farming here meant sugar beans and *amadumbe*, planted by the elderly," says Angela Larkan, Thanda's executive director and co-founder.

"Now, young people are farming with intention and innovation. They are running their own operations under Thanda's mentorship, feeding their families and building a different kind of future."

The case study farm is designed not only to produce results but to change perceptions, too.

"What gives me hope is watching a 22-year-old step into the field with pride, knowing they're not just growing food – they're growing independence, identity and opportunity. That's what transformation looks like," continues Larkan.

Farming, once seen as a last resort, can become a viable and respected pathway to success for youth determined to shape their own futures from the ground up. – Thanda

## MATTER OF FACT

In the 30 May issue of *Farmer's Weekly*, an error appeared in the article titled 'How the SA Saddlebred has built a global reputation'. A caption accompanying an image, also pictured here, read: 'Ukuqala, the South African Grand Champion Single Harness, shown by owner

Cecil du Plessis'. However, it should have read: 'Gift of Class, the South African Grand Champion Stallion, owned by Wim van Bergen and shown by Jack Boyi'.

*Farmer's Weekly* has a high regard for factual accuracy and welcomes reader input.

