

# Waitrose workers' labour bears fruit

The supermarket is helping black South Africans assert their economic power, writes Zoe Wood

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Buying oranges these days might not seem like a political act. But if you are a Waitrose shopper, notching up your daily vitamin C intake is actually helping to unwind social injustice caused by more than 40 years of apartheid.

Through the Waitrose Foundation the supermarket, part of the John Lewis Partnership, is helping to empower black farm workers, funding the social and educational projects that are vital stepping stones if the scars left by white minority rule are to heal.

The foundation started two years ago with the goal of returning a portion of Waitrose's profits to its South African farmer suppliers. It aims to complement the Black Economic Empowerment (Bee) policies introduced by the South African government to drive economic transformation. The Bee reforms - essentially a huge social engineering project - aim to increase significantly the number of black people who manage, own and control the country's economy, and reduce the wealth gap that persists between black and white South Africans.

One of the central tenets of Bee is land reform, with a government target of 30 per cent of land being owned by black South Africans by 2014. Mohammad Karaan, a respected South African academic who is involved with drafting the evolving Bee legislation, concedes that there has been 'limited' success so far, with less than 5 per cent now in black hands. He says the involvement of retailers like Waitrose is crucial. 'It establishes the notion that firms are not merely here to exploit local resources as has been depicted in so much of our history.'

Land reform is usually a controversial process, not least in Zimbabwe, but Karaan says there is sufficient land available on the market to meet the 2014 target. 'White farmers have generally accepted the need to reform. However, much more can be done to collaborate as the state and private sector are running in tandem.'

White farmers such as De Villiers Graaff, a grape producer and Waitrose supplier based in the Hex Valley region, are leading the way. Graaff helped his workers to buy a neighbouring farm with government aid. The workers' controlling stake is held in trust with the farm run as a co-operative. 'The government is under pressure to get things moving but the most important thing is education,' he says. 'Until previously disadvantaged individuals achieve a level position they must be helped by those with the necessary skills.'

South Africa's economy is enjoying strong growth but the disruption caused by apartheid is deep-rooted, with whole generations deprived of education, and crime and unemployment remaining high. As a result, many middle-aged black South Africans are trapped in a culture of dependency.

The foundation supports 'upliftment' schemes at 24 farms, which collectively help 11,000 workers. It prides itself on being 'bottom up' - relying on farm workers to generate project ideas by forming worker councils. The most common requests are for community centres that can

house creches and after-school clubs, but it also funds teaching posts to facilitate adult education programmes. As the foundation matures, Waitrose envisages that its focus will shift to helping workers acquire assets by offering grants or professional expertise.

The impact of the foundation can be seen in action at Katco, a citrus fruit co-operative near Port Elizabeth, a corner of the Eastern Cape province. For the past two years it has supported a women's workshop, which offers training in sewing, beadwork and leatherwork. To take part, Katco workers must also take part in education courses that seek to deal with common social problems such as alcohol abuse and domestic violence, as well as the high prevalence of HIV/Aids.

Claire Wasdell, who set up the project, says it has transformed the lives of local women, who now run their own shop. 'The workshop has become a community centre. The women are extremely proud of what they have achieved. We want people to walk out of this project and have enough confidence to start their own businesses.

'Handing over a farm will be the icing on the cake,' adds Wasdell.

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