

INTENSIVE CROP PRODUCTION TO BOOST FOOD SECURITY IN LESOTHO



Intensive Crop Production (ICP) is a subsidy program of the government of Lesotho that is implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition (MAFSN). The main goal of the program is to increase grain/cereal production and productivity and to improve food security hence reduce poverty in the country. As such it is anticipated that in future the current reliance of the country on emergency support and food imports will be reduced. The 2023/2024 overall budget for the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition under intensive Crop Production Program is M315 177 486,90 of which M244 314.19 will be used for procurement of agricultural inputs for both summer and winter cropping. In recognition for sourcing costs of production, the Ministry found it necessary to subsidize fertilizer at the rate of 80%, seed and herbicides at 70% respectively to promote investment in agriculture. Farmers are expected to pay 20% and 30% of the unit cost for fertilizer and seed respectively. In this case the intensive crop production in Lesotho has adopted the block farming model.

Block farming is a concept in Lesotho of which a government has introduced for adoption by farmers. Block farming is defined by the ministry of agriculture and food security as the farming system whereby block farmers engage in commercial production through the consolidation of fields into a minimum of 10 hectares for winter and 20 hectares for summer block with the written agreement of field owners to make them available to the private block and government block through share-cropping. Fields must be planted with the same crop under recommended crop production guidelines on inputs, mechanical operations, and field management. Block farming has commenced with grains, but it is encouraged that proposed blocks of other crops such as pulses.

Block farming is important as it provides job creation in farming community, it increases production hence increases food security per household during sharing of the produce, reduce area of fallow land in the country, increase the number of farmers participating actively in crop production, promote effective farming practices that conserve soil fertility.

However, while block farming concept is a welcome development, farmers must be cautious as there are concerns that if not approached knowledgeably, shortage of agricultural machinery will result in delays in operations such as shortage of combine harvesters therefore damage of crops as a result, theft of inputs and produce by community members, lack of commitment in undertaking proper field operations.

This is what the government of Lesotho through the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition have devoted to their efforts to improve and sustain block farming. The plan for 2023-2024 cropping season was to continue with the subsidy programme but following the consultations conducted by the ministry to the farmers, it was discovered during the last cropping season, farmers did not perform well on production due to climate change challenges such as prolonged rains hence low purchasing power of inputs for current cropping season. According to the meteorological forecast (winter seasonal outlook, 2023), the anticipated is El-nino (drought) from October 2023-December 2024 which will negatively impact summer cropping. In addition, the country is also faced with challenges of huge number of people, who need humanitarian assistance to under estimated 521,000 (Vulnerability Assessment Report, 2022). The government of Lesotho through MAFSN has decided to engage in block with an intention to increase cereal production in the country. The proposed sharing ratio will be 80% government and 20% farmers. Farmers are also engaged in their individual blocks whereby areas of high potential for summer crops will be identified per district where they can aggregate fields into blocks. The ministry will continue to provide extension services to the farmers and mobilize market opportunities for all who have aggregated fields into blocks.

This initiative started in 2006 and was carried out through 2019, however the intended outcomes were not achieved due to the above-mentioned challenges said the crop production officer Mrs Nkhala Mokhethi. Mokhethi further explained that the subsidy on fertilizers, seeds and herbicides is categorial at the above-mentioned rates and will initially be mobilized to the mountain districts where summer cropping usually starts earlier due to the short cropping season. Foothills and lowlands will be served subsequently as they have a bit longer cropping season.