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Sweetening the Soil: How Livelihood Agriculture Transformed Khwenxurha

{This article is part of the #WriteYourFutureSA series and involves fictitious characters and scenarios from the perspective of a person living in 2036 designed to explore the possibilities of our shared future. We invite readers to imagine their own futures and contact info@afesis.org.za if they would like to contribute their own "Write Your Future" article to this growing collection of visions.}

By Ronald Eglin, PhD

My Future Series

#WriteYourFutureSA

Standing on the stage in Bhisho earlier this week while clutching the heavy glass trophy from the Eastern Cape Agricultural Association, I found myself looking out at the crowd and thinking not of my own bee hives, but of the thousands of small gardens and grazing plots that now define our community.

My name is Nosipho, and as a recently retired teacher who returned in 2026 to Khwenxurha (my ancestral home) to be with my siblings and extended family, this journey has been as much about reconnecting with my roots as it has been about building a business.

Receiving an award for my success in honey production and my work as the local representative of the Khwenxurha Livelihood Farmers Association was a deeply humbling moment, but the true prize is the rural-village landscape I now live in today.

As I look across the rolling hills of Khwenxurha in this year of 2036, it is clear that agriculture is no longer just seen as a separate industry or a distant dream of commercial success.

It is everywhere. It thrives in the small vegetable patches behind our kitchen doors, it hums in the vibrant allotment gardens on the village edges, and it breathes in the vast communal grazing lands that stretch toward the horizon.

Agriculture has become the very lifeblood of our community, flowing through our daily routines and existing as a vital force in the veins of our people at every possible scale.

The journey to this point began with a difficult but necessary realisation back in 2026, the same year I packed up my classroom and moved back home. At that time, many of us were still chasing the mirage of industrial, commercial farming, believing that we had to become large- scale landowners to be considered successful.

However, during the intense planning processes of the mid-2020s, our community came to a collective understanding that our land would never support dozens of large-scale agricultural and commercial enterprises. We realised that if we tried to copy the industrial model, only a few would succeed while the rest would be left with very little.

This was the moment we shifted our focus toward local livelihood agriculture, which is aligned with the broader agroecology movement. Unlike commercial agriculture, which is driven by profit margins, monocrops, and distant markets, livelihood agriculture is about resilience and integration.

It is a family-first approach that uses organic farming practices to ensure the long-term health of our soil and our people.

It reduces the cost of living and creates a local web of trade that keeps our money circulating within our own villages rather than leaking away to big retail chains in distant towns.

This shift was rooted in the local spatial development principles we developed alongside the municipality a decade ago. We decided to protect the rural-village lifestyle that makes Khwenxurha unique.

We divided our community into landscape realms: the natural realm for our indigenous forests and water sources, the agricultural realm for our crops and animals, and the settlement realm for our homes.

One of our most successful spatial strategies was the principle of alternating ridge settlements with ridge grasslands. This careful design ensures that people living in our villages can always see open, rolling grassland areas in the distance.

It prevents our landscape from looking like a crowded township with houses stretching in all directions. Instead, it feels open and productive, maintaining a sense of place that is both modern and deeply traditional.

The social fabric of this agricultural economy has been enriched by a diverse range of local participants, including those who work in nearby towns and return home over weekends or those who run their own local businesses.

We have seen a massive growth in the working-from-home movement, with people utilising digital connectivity to conduct professional services while still tending to their goats or gardens during their breaks.

For school leavers facing a lack of formal employment opportunities, local agricultural livelihood development has provided an essential alternative pathway. By turning to productive land use, these young adults embrace a life that restores their pride and dignity, moving beyond a sole reliance on the financial lifeline provided by government social grants.

Furthermore, my fellow elder retirees have become some of the most enthusiastic sectors of this growing economy. Having returned from careers in the cities, just as I did, they have brought back energy and wisdom, taking the lead in establishing organic orchards and mentoring the younger generation in the nuances of the local climate.

Our residents truly love the rural-village lifestyle that this focus on livelihood agriculture has helped foster. Even tourists have begun to take notice: visitors frequently comment on how much they love seeing so much agricultural activity, and many choose to sleep over in local bed and breakfast establishments just to soak in the farming lifestyle and enjoy our fresh, organic produce.

My own contribution to the growth of this livelihood agricultural sector started very small upon my return to my family homestead. In 2026, I had just one beehive at the back of my house, alongside a modest patch of vegetables and a few chicks. However, the path to my current success was not a straight line, and I faced significant setbacks that tested my resolve.

Before the honey business flourished, I attempted to establish a small poultry business focused on selling broiler chickens and fresh eggs to my neighbours.

I invested a great deal of my energy and savings into quality feed and sturdy coops, hoping to carve out a niche in the local market.

Despite my hard work, the venture struggled to take off because I quickly realised that many other families in the community were already well-established in poultry farming. They had perfected superior, low-cost techniques over many years, such as breeding hardy indigenous free-range breeds that forage naturally, formulating their own low-cost organic feed from local crop waste, and using simple natural remedies to keep coops disease-free.

Combined with their existing trade networks, this allowed them to offer produce at prices I could not match. It was a humbling lesson that taught me the importance of finding a unique role within our local livelihood ecosystem rather than simply duplicating what others were already doing successfully.

I did not give up, but instead of trying to force a model that was already well-served by others, I chose to pivot my focus to the bees.

I realised that while poultry required intense daily management and faced heavy local competition, beekeeping was a low-intervention, high-value activity that actually supported my neighbours by pollinating their crops.

I remember the challenges of those early years, especially the struggle to manage water during the dry spells. I had to become a student of the land, learning how to harvest every drop of storm and rainwater from my roof and how to turn every scrap of kitchen and garden waste into rich, dark compost.

As I realised that my bees were the quiet engines of the village, pollinating my neighbours' pumpkins and beans even as they made my honey, I began to expand.

I placed more hives in the village allotment gardens and eventually began planting what I call bee pastures. These are strips of nectar-rich indigenous flowers and shrubs that serve as both a food source for my swarms and as living fences that protect our crops from roaming livestock.

Today, this model of local livelihood agriculture is visible wherever you look. At the homestead scale, almost every family has moved beyond simple subsistence to production of fruit, vegetables, pigs, and poultry.

We have also seen farming taking place in our local institutions, with schools managing their own vegetable patches and fruit trees being planted around sports fields to provide shade and snacks for the children.

Beyond the homes, our village allotment gardens have become hubs of activity where neighbours share tools and knowledge. Our communal grazing lands are no longer the site of conflict they once were, as they are now managed by an association of cattle and goat owners who ensure the land is never overgrazed.

We even have small community-managed timber plantations that provide wood for furniture, while our natural areas remain a rich source of traditional medicines and wild herbs that we harvest with organic care.

Seeing this foundation take root has sparked incredible creative energy, with residents continuously exploring new livelihood agricultural ideas suited to different skills and spaces.

Community members are actively looking into possibilities like oyster mushroom cultivation in shaded outbuildings, vermicomposting for organic fertiliser trade, and small-scale aquaculture in rainwater ponds.

Others are experimenting with insect farming to produce cheap protein for livestock, growing indigenous essential-oil plants like rose geranium, processing bio-char for soil health, and launching artisanal seed-saving initiatives.

While many of these ventures are still in their infancy or planning stages, they show the vast array of possibilities open to anyone looking to build a dignified livelihood from the land.

None of this happened by accident: it was built on a foundation of dedicated support systems.

The government re-orientated its programmes to meet us where we were. We saw the rise of the Livelihood Agriculture Support Programme and a community plant nursery that provides us with seedlings specifically suited to our climate.

Perhaps most importantly, we established a permanent agricultural market at our new neighbourhood hub and a rotating periodic mobile market circuit.

This mobile circuit moves through the villages, providing an opportunity for people in even the most remote areas to reach a bigger market and sell their produce.

Through our innovative food box programme, local consumers pay for seasonal produce upfront, providing local livelihood farmers with guaranteed early-stage capital and predictable revenue regardless of market fluctuations.

By combining this advance-purchase model with our "buy local" campaign, we have established a reliable, community-backed economic foundation that allows our small-scale farmers to thrive.

Our success has not gone unnoticed. People from other communal land areas and distant communities have been visiting Khwenxurha recently to see what we have achieved and to learn from our experience. We are now also planning several future initiatives to further improve our agricultural potential.

The first is a short-stay immersive education initiative where youth and visitors from other communities can learn the practicalities of organic livelihood farming. This will also serve to re-orientate agricultural extension officers from the department of agriculture, helping them understand that success is measured by household resilience rather than just industrial yield. We hope that this initiative will bring in much needed extra money that can circulate within our community.

Another planned initiative involves a partnership with a local university to conduct research on innovative cattle ownership and management models.

We are looking at examples such as a shared-equity herd system where families can own a portion of a larger, professionally managed herd, or a holistic management co-operative that uses high-density, short-duration grazing to regenerate the grasslands.

We have also started research into securing more water through diverse methods: this includes implementing in-field rainwater harvesting using swales and mulching to keep our soil hydrated, mapping deep-aquifer groundwater for sustainable solar-powered boreholes, and constructing groundwater recharge trenches and pits that collect surface runoff and guide it into the earth to replenish our underground reserves before being linked back to our borehole systems.

We are also channelling runoff water from our roads into a greater network of retention ponds, and we have focused on the development of small-scale greywater recycling systems that can be used safely in our intensive homestead agricultural tunnels.

What we have achieved in Khwenxurha is the proof that our strength lies in the integration of all the small parts of our lives.

We have moved beyond the old, narrow way of thinking where a person was just a worker or just a farmer; today, we are all stewards of a living landscape.

This focus on local livelihood agriculture has done much more than just provide a secondary income or a safety net for our families. It has become the very essence of the rural-village lifestyle we envisaged during those long community meetings a decade ago.

Every time a neighbour plants a fruit tree, every time a retiree or school leaver tends to a new organic patch, and every time the hum of my bees fills the air over our ridge grasslands, our collective vision grows more real and more whole.

We are reaping the rewards of a landscape that is intentionally designed to be both productive and beautiful, where the modern world of remote work and digital connectivity sits comfortably alongside the ancient rhythms of the soil. We have found that when everyone does their own little bit, the entire community begins to breathe with a new kind of vitality.

As I look at the future, I see a community that has found its sweetness, not just in the honey from my hives, but in the enduring resilience and wholeness we have grown together from the ground up.

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