

Gerhard Mostert congratulates David Makome on receiving the TSB Cane Growers Award for the best grower of the 2005 season



The sweet taste of success

by Hanlie du Plessis

The South African sugar industry produces sugar and molasses for the local and export markets from 15 mills in KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape. There are 53 000 registered cane growers. More than 50 000 of these growers farm on tribal authority land and produce over 17% of the South African cane crop.

Factors such as low world prices for sugar made it hard for cane growers to survive. As a result less cane was produced by small-scale growers in recent years. In the Nkomazi district, close to Malelane, we met with cane growers of the Walda Project who tell a different story. About three years ago, they were the victims of thieves stealing their irrigation pipes. They tried to get financing to buy new irrigation pipes, but were not successful.

The farmers asked Ben Liebenberg and Gerhard Mostert to help them. Liebenberg and Mostert developed new systems for the project, drew up business plans and became involved in the management of the farms. Mostert now represents 32 farmers with over 340 hectares of cane. Johan van Rensburg, a lawyer from Malelane, is responsible for the finance applications and administration of the project.

John Shabangu is not only a cane grower, but a very successful building contractor as well. He is the chairman of the Walda Group. They have regular meetings with all the role players present.

TABLE 1: Production history

Season	2002	2003	2005
Average ton cane/ha	71,3	55,4	152,7

This helps to address problems before they become too serious. It also creates the opportunity to learn more about new products and technology to help them farm better.

The group was able to get financing from Afgri. They could buy the much needed irrigation systems and necessary fertilisers. As a result, their average yield in 2005 was three times higher than in 2003. Because of this, Piet Jordaan, agricultural economist of Land Bank in Nelspruit, recognised the potential of the group, and helped finance them for 2006 at a lower interest rate. This will help the farmers make a better profit on their harvests this year.

The Walda Project's farmers produce for the TSB mill in Malelane. "Our grower advisory department has worked very closely with Gerhard Mostert and various other role players at Walda. Although there have been numerous logistical problems during the development stage, the project is running very well. The farmers have shown unbelievable dedication and are producing very high yielding sugar cane. TSB is certainly very proud of their achievements," says Greg Gillespie, small grower development manager of TSB Sugar.

Gillespie provided us with the statistics in *Table 1*. According to him, the main reasons for the bigger harvests are the improvement in technology and management, as well as the farmers' will to make it work. His message to other emerging farmers is: "Be totally involved in your farming operation, control your finances, ask and seek good advice and be willing to learn."

David Makome had the best yield of all the Walda farmers. TSB awarded him a certificate for his excellent harvest. He proudly told the *Ubisi Mail* that he is successful because he is on the farm every day and he follows the advice of Mostert. "My dream is to one day own a bigger farm," says Makome.

This dream may become a reality soon. According to Mostert, the next step is to identify a group of 5-10 cane growers with the necessary potential and passion. These farmers will have to form a company with their own directors. They will have to find the proper land, 100-200 hectares, at a decent price. The good news is that there are a couple of financial institutions that already indicated that they would be interested to be involved.

The Walda Project is a very good example of an incubator. Small-scale farmers are helped and mentored so that their farming and management skills are developed. This then helps them to become independent commercial farmers one day. **UM**

John Shabangu, chairman of the Walda group, shows how tall his cane is growing

