

REPORT
—Stargrow

Out of South Africa

STELLENBOSCH—Stargrow Group is celebrating 20 years in service of the South African fruit industry this year – but it is highlighting a developing role across the wider African continent.

by Fred Meintjes



Against the background of forecasted food shortages and unused resources on the continent, and driven by the fact that African nations had been placing greater emphasis on agricultural development, South Africa's Stargrow Group launched an African development support programme in 2003. Now, more than a decade later, chairman Michiel Prins says that working in African countries outside South Africa has become a key part of the company's philosophy.

Indeed, Stargrow Africa is today involved in nine countries stretching from the south to the north of the continent. "Our involvement is through the supply of plant material, supplying equipment needed in agriculture, technical advice and helping to turn failing projects around," explains Prins. A separate division of Stargrow Group, Stargrow Marketing, supplies marketing services for these projects, as well as being involved in North Africa to supplement supply for its customers during times when the fruit is not available from South Africa.

According to Stargrow Africa managing director Gilliam Vermeulen the company is mainly involved with Sub-Saharan countries, including Namibia, Angola, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Lesotho. "Africa has its own challenges and we have learnt valuable lessons along the way,"

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ABOVE—Plants growing as part of Stargrow's Lesotho operation

says Prins, who notes that agricultural projects often fail because of a lack of planning, a lack of capacity or because plantings are done in the wrong areas.

"We mainly supply plant material, technical advice and assist in strategic input and decisions," says Vermeulen. "Our work is based on proper consultation prior to our engagement, project scoping and attention to factors which will ensure sustainability. In terms of plant material we are able to deliver a wide range of material depending on the needs of the projects, and we follow this up with technical assistance during the process

of establishment." He says close liaison with governments is important because agricultural programmes in Africa, more often than not, are directly linked to national development programmes. "We therefore make a contribution along the whole chain from building the capacity of those involved across the value chain to marketing advice and support."

Vermeulen says that in most countries, around 80 per cent of the initiatives involve NGOs and government, while 20 per cent are focused on the private sector. Lesotho, a landlocked country within South Africa's borders, is a good example of Stargrow Africa's involvement with African countries.

"There we have already supplied 70,000 trees and vines of which 50 per cent have been supplied to small growers. Most of the product resulting from this will be for consumption by the people involved. The rest are planted in commercial orchards and vineyards which have really become flagship projects for the country's development, job creation and food security programme."

Stargrow's ability to supply new and exciting varieties that come into production early is well recognised in southern Africa, according to Vermeulen. "Our ability to help select the best soils and micro climates is proving vital in the eventual success and sustainability of the projects."

Prins explains that Stargrow Marketing is able to help growers and commercial projects in these countries with access to markets, and in doing so can make a huge contribution to sustainable agricultural development on the continent. "In the process we are also demonstrating the unique capacity of the fruit industry to contribute to job creation, which is essential for Africa's economic growth." **E**