



Farming initiative will provide food and electricity

ELFAS TORERAI

RURAL communities in the North West could soon reap the benefits of a solar power farming initiative run by the North West University (NWU) and German company SUNfarming.

The partnership between NWU's engineering faculty and SUNfarming was informed by the realisation that the need for education, sustainable job creation and food security in African countries is increasing.

An innovative solution was developed to meet the needs of the communities by establishing a food and solar energy training centre in Potchefstroom.

The food and energy solution centre consists of special agro-solar greenhouse structures, the first of their kind.

The facility is where continuous training and research on new solutions for the future are being carried out.

SUNfarming also collaborated with the University of Nairobi in Kenya, Cape Coast University in Ghana, Copperbelt University in Zambia and BIUST University in Botswana.

The partnership has reached out to the Ikageng community in Potchefstroom and is transferring skills to community members, building for them a

food and energy facility which provides them with energy, sustainable jobs and food.

The food and energy project is co-funded by the German government and is focusing on the application of technological engineering solutions and taking traditional, small-scale vegetable farming to new heights.

Dean of the engineering faculty at NWU, Prof LJ Grobler, said this concept enables them to multiply the use from the same available surface area.

"We are doubling the value of the surface area as not only has the agricultural produce grown, but the solar panels are also generating energy," he said.

Vegetables like cauliflower, lettuce, spinach, cabbage, broccoli and onions are grown in three unique greenhouses. The initial plants, fertiliser and compost were donated by NWU and SUNfarming.

After selling the produce, residents will take it upon themselves to continue with production.

The project has so far benefited several women from Ikageng community who are being trained and educated on a weekly basis on cultivation methods, insect control, nutritional values of the different crops, root systems and harvesting techniques.



SOLAR POWER FARMING: The food and energy solution centre will consist of special agro-solar greenhouse structures.

Motlalepula Magini is one of the beneficiaries and looks forward to the project.

"As soon as the vegetables are ready to be harvested, we will sell them to local supermarkets. We can use this income to compensate ourselves, buy new plants, fertiliser and compost to restart the process.

"It is a sustainable solution that creates jobs for us and empowers others with the wholesomeness from the earth. It enables us to be less dependent on others," Motlalepula said.

She said they had a responsibility to

transfer the knowledge they were gaining to their children and neighbouring residents.

"I can already see the excitement about our project. We will soon be taking plants home where we will all start our own vegetable gardens. The plan is to expand this initiative and to empower as many as 50 women with knowledge and skills," she said.

Since 2004, SUNfarming has become successful as a project developer and operator of photovoltaic plants.

Having initially started as an investment controller, SUNfarming gained

substantial experience in the design, construction, development and operation of large, medium and small scale photovoltaic plants.

With an experienced team of 100 commercial staff, engineers and electrical engineers, SUNfarming has successfully realised projects of 450MW capacity worldwide.

SUNfarming founder Peter Schrum said the company needed partners like universities, municipalities and private stakeholders for it to erect a 20MW food and energy plant in each major city.

"One plant can create between 50 and 65 employment opportunities per project and it offers an income opportunity that is a combination of food production and energy generation. As it is combined, the risk factors are reduced significantly.

"The benefits for citizens and the local government are endless. This project will facilitate broad-based community participation with long-term ownership, sustainable food and energy production and job security benefits with a strong training component to those who need it most," Schrum said.

The project offers local government and companies the opportunity to

become involved in the rollout of these

food and energy plants to rural communities as part of their corporate social responsibility and to stimulate economic growth.

"Through the cooperation with African educational institutions, we seek to lay the groundwork for future investment and joint ventures between our company and local communities in your country," Schrum said.

Statistics show that one in eight people go to bed hungry each night and in most African countries, one in three children are underweight.

Delivering food is only a temporary solution.

A more permanent and sustainable solution is giving people the means to produce food for themselves.

He said that the food and energy initiative strives to do just that.

"We supply energy to communities while food security enjoys priority. Through this initiative, we also create the platform for more jobs and offer people the opportunity to become more educated.

"Investors from the private and public sector have a unique opportunity to get involved, alleviate poverty and contribute to the well-being of citizens and the African continent," Schrum said.

elfast@thenewage.co.za