Agriculture has long been recognized as a powerful tool in the fight against extreme poverty. In South Africa, maize plays a vital role in the agricultural sector and is recognized worldwide for its quality. The country’s smallholder farmers, however, face significant challenges in earning a sustainable livelihood through the crop.

This is especially true in the Eastern Cape. South Africa’s poorest province ranks second to last in maize production, accounting for a mere 169 metric tons of maize in 2020–2021. In contrast, the province of Freestate, which leads in maize cultivation, produced a staggering 7 million metric tons during the same timeframe.

Several barriers prevent Eastern Cape’s smallholder farmers from making a living from maize: a lack of knowledge regarding good agricultural practices, limited access to quality inputs for pest and disease management, and inadequate storage infrastructure. Furthermore, in OR Tambo – one of the poorest districts in the Eastern Cape – farmers view maize production as a household chore rather than a business opportunity.

To ensure the long-term resilience and food security of communities in need, Tanager and the John Deere Foundation have partnered to implement the Imbewu Farmer Development project in OR Tambo District, Eastern Cape province. (“Imbewu” means “seed” in Xhosa, the language spoken most frequently in the province.) The project, which takes a market systems approach, will enhance agricultural productivity, facilitate access to commercial markets, and improve incomes for the district’s smallholder farmers.

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1. 2020/2021 Crop Estimates Committee, Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, Republic of South Africa
TECHNICAL APPROACH
The first year of Imbewu Farmer Development introduced farmers to good agricultural practices. The project is building upon this knowledge via a three-pronged approach to boost farmers’ production efficiency and profit potential:

AGGREGATION
An aggregated, or “block,” farming approach will enable farmers to join forces and become more competitive: By consolidating their production, farmers gain economies of scale whereby they can access commercial markets typically closed off to them.

STORAGE
Storage allows farmers to take advantage of price fluctuations in the market: Proper storage minimizes post-harvest losses while ensuring farmers can hold their crops for sale until prices are at their highest.

ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM
Farmers must leverage the entrepreneurial ecosystem to be successful: The project will therefore facilitate partnerships with agri input dealers, financial institutions, and mechanization dealers to help smallholder farmers maximize their yields.

VOLUNTEER PROGRAM
With access to a uniquely skilled workforce through John Deere, Tanager and John Deere Foundation have incorporated a volunteering program into the Imbewu Farmer Development project. Select John Deere employees will have the opportunity to provide much-needed business management training to local entrepreneurs in OR Tambo District – layering critical business skills upon the project’s agricultural capacity-building initiatives.

“There has always been the traditional knowledge of maize farming, but we have acquired new knowledge to really make it profitable” —Mlungisi Ndobeni

TARGET IMPACT
The project promises to yield significant outcomes for farmers, small and medium enterprises, and, ultimately, households across OR Tambo District:

2,760
Number of farmers

67%
Increase in maize yields

67%
Increase in income