

AAVF creates platform for vertical farming network

The African Association for Vertical Farming (AAVF) recently held its launch and inaugural conference for vertical farming in Africa at the University of Johannesburg's Soweto campus. The conference spanned three days and featured speakers, workshops and site visits to vertical farming enterprises.



The programme line-up included Dr Naudé Malan from UJ's Anthropology and Development Studies department, Josephine Favre, president of AAVF, Veronica Shangali Aswani, co-founder of WavuNow and official AAVF representative in South Africa, Thendo Ratshitanga, head of agriculture at Simeka Capital Holdings, and Zandile Kumalo, director of HyHarvest (Pty) Ltd.

AAVF's vision and mission

According to Josephine Favre, the AAVF is not just another non-profit organisation. They are in fact building a network of individuals, organisations and research institutions in Africa's urban agriculture sector, and providing a digital platform that connects all stakeholders, helping to enhance coordination and collective action within the industry.

"Our members will be able to organise their efforts, collaborate to overcome problems and form partnerships that will drive individual success and move the industry forward sustainably," she said.

The need for an association such as the AAVF has been expressed by many smallholder farmers, university professors and technology professionals in Africa for some time now. Such an association is much needed as Africa is threatened by rapid urbanisation, resource scarcity, climate change and dwindling infrastructure.

Benefits of vertical farming

Thendo Ratshitanga, part owner of Rooftop Roots and a vertical farmer himself, discussed vertical farming and the benefits and challenges associated with it. Vertical farming can be divided into two broad categories: green walls or living walls, both used mainly for decorative purposes and vertical food crops in production systems which are also known as plant factories.

Plant factories are usually indoor operations located inside buildings or greenhouses. They are used to grow food crops and can be utilised in conjunction with hydroponics (plants are grown in a soilless, nutrient-enriched water solution), aquaponics (a system that combines conventional aquaculture with hydroponics), aeroponics (crops grown in an air or mist environment without soil) and soil in limited instances.

Vertical farming has many benefits such as year-round production, increased profitability, fewer space requirements and a reduced carbon footprint, but it is not without its challenges, some of which include the cost of infrastructure, reliable electricity supply and knowledge and skills.

Sustainable food production

"Food security should not be seasonal, as hunger is not seasonal," said Favre.

Food security and sustainability was without a doubt the topic of the day, with many speakers addressing it during their presentations. However, no one was fooled into thinking that vertical farming is the solution to food security. Ratshitanga did, however, emphasise that it offers an opportunity for people to take charge of their food requirements by growing their own food.

Veronica Shangali Aswani from WavuNow shared her knowledge regarding opportunities for transformation and Zandile Kumalo, a young vertical farming entrepreneur, spoke about how she started her business, HyHarvest, the challenges she faced and her expansion plans for the future.

"With the right support, expertise, implementation and respecting the cultural beliefs and integrity of our African communities, we can turn great opportunities into engines of sustainable urban upliftment and food security in Africa. We must act now and move towards more sustainable thinking and practices. Nothing is impossible. Let's help Africa to sustain Africa," said Favre.

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