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SA can learn from the way Colombia perked up

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COLOMBIA gets a bad rap. Notorious for its narco-wars, guerrilla insurgencies, rampant kidnappings and violent crime, the country was once regarded as a hopeless case — an ungovernable “cowboy territory” blessed with enormous potential but plagued by a people unwilling to salvage their nation from a brutal and seemingly endless civil war. Things are not always as they seem and Colombia has — in recent years — changed for the better. Crime levels are down, guerrilla and paramilitary groups are either being demobilised or driven from bustling urban centres, and Bogota is no longer “the kidnap capital of the world”.

Improved security has brought foreign tourists and investors flocking to Colombia. The country is booming and, unlike its neighbours in the region, economic growth, which reached 8% in the last trimester, is not based on oil or hydrocarbons. Real industry and services are fuelling Colombia’s growth, and it attracts roughly double the annual foreign investment flowing to SA, which is about the same size in terms of geography and population.

But the most important emerging trend in Colombia is the strong sense of optimism among the people. Colombians have realised the need to take responsibility for the future of their country. Despite vast improvements in recent years, the country is not without its problems. It still suffers from unusually high levels of crime and inequality, not to mention the stigma of drugs and violent cartels. But under these adverse circumstances Colombians are consciously working to improve the image of their country abroad. And the most effective tool has been coffee.

Colombia is not the world’s largest producer or exporter of coffee. That title belongs to Brazil and Vietnam, which have surged ahead in bulk coffee production in recent years. But Colombia is synonymous with a high-quality product and its Arabica beans are widely regarded by baristas and aficionados as the best in the world.

About 10 years ago, shortly after the commercialisation of coffee in Colombia, the logo of Juan Valdez — the quintessential cafetero and his mule — emerged as a symbol of 100% Colombian coffee for local and international buyers of coffee. It proved to be a highly successful promotional agent for Colombia’s national product. Local Colombians and the government quickly caught on to this iconic

figure that foreigners associated with Colombian coffee — and the high-quality product of the country — and piggybacked his image to promote the country and “Brand Colombia” abroad. Juan Valdez has provided an alternative image of Colombia that is a far cry from that of Pablo Escobar — infamous head of the Medellin drug cartel — and other negative perceptions associated with the country in the past. Like wine in SA, Colombia’s elixir commodity — the coffee bean — symbolises a smooth blend of savoury sophistication, which helps extinguish the stereotypical images of gross underdevelopment, crime and violence.

Juan Valdez soon developed into a lucrative business of coffee-serving stores. There are 65 locations across Colombia, Spain and the US, each offering a taste of the country by introducing consumers to the 100% coffee and culture of Colombia. The initiative is also supported by international organisations such as the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation, which is investing an additional \$20m to expand the chain yet further across Europe and Latin America in an effort to entice more foreign investment in Colombia. Ultimately, coffee and the symbol of Juan Valdez are doing what diplomats and ordinary Colombians have struggled to do for so long — they are attracting foreign investment and tourists back to Colombia.

Herein lies a lesson for SA and Africa in general. Society and governments need to take a more proactive role in promoting their country and continent abroad by exporting home-grown optimism and identifying products with a nationalist bent to champion a positive image for outside consumers and investors.

Coffee-producing countries such as Burundi and Rwanda may adopt a similar strategy to that of Colombia to attract foreign investment and tourism. Africa is still largely excluded from the international perception of gourmet coffee producers, despite a thriving industry in many countries across the continent. Coffee should come to symbolise a new era of quality products and sophistication emerging from less developing regions in Africa.

Meanwhile in SA, in spite of its superior quality wines and a world-class wine route, the country still lacks a cohesive strategy around the promotion of its wines abroad. Wines of SA are often overlooked alongside new-world competitors from Chile, Argentina and Australia, which carry a greater nationalist orientation of quality among foreign consumers. Such an approach will help individual products from SA gain traction in foreign markets while concurrently exposing consumers to the sophisticated and full-bodied flavour of “Brand SA”.

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