

Public Works in Welkom

Local people take ownership

Trade unions are critical of Public Works Programmes because of the low wages offered. However these small amounts of cash can unleash a new energy in communities. **Kally Forrest** spoke to **David Cooper** about the Public Works Programme in Welkom where people have gained a new dignity and spirit of caring through serving the community.

Bronville a former coloured township and two adjacent informal settlements, Hani Park and Mandela Park next to Welkom in the North West, have undergone important changes recently. People have been working hard to change the community they live in. Over the last year 1 000 people have taken part in government's Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP).

In people's yards and in public spaces vegetable gardens are sprouting. As these gardens flourished a number of women started cooking groups where this fresh produce is made into nourishing meals for kids in local crèches.

The high school in Bronville servicing these communities has also seen big changes. It was the site of ill disciplined pupils and teachers. Drug and alcohol abuse was rampant, the perimeter fence had collapsed, ceilings were hanging loose, and the school was dirty and dilapidated. Now the community has erected a fence around the school to keep out drug pushers and vagrants. A group of recently matriculated youths run homework classes and on cleaned-up fields they run sports activities for pupils in the afternoons.

The Old Age Home has also been

repaired and 80 crèches have been set up where children who were previously left alone at home are now lovingly cared for. Parks have been created for the community to enjoy and the new braai areas are well used.

Around the perimeter of these settlements lay huge waste dumps which created an unsightly health hazard that worried the municipality which had no funds to deal with it. With the help of municipal trucks people have cleared the rubbish and proper municipal landfill sites now function. Graveyards were also cleaned up.

Stagnant water from leaking sewerage and water pipes are also a thing of the past. Unemployed plumbers are working with untrained youths to fix and lay new pipes.

The pride and dignity that this community work has given to people has meant that crime rates have dropped sharply, including child rape. A new spirit of caring has entered the community as sick and elderly people are visited and helped to access social services and HIV/Aids orphans are assisted to access grants. So enthusiastic has been the community response that the programme was expanded to include a further 1 000 people. So how did this all happen?

BACKGROUND TO PROGRAMME

In 2007 a Public Works pilot project was started in Umzimvubu in KwaZulu-Natal. In the wake of this project and the upcoming 2008 elections, the ANC government needing to demonstrate delivery, released funds to replicate this model across the country and provide 50 000 jobs. A budget was rushed through and 50 projects were started at different sites.

In this period David Cooper, a consultant in the presidency, was phoned by a pastoor from Bronhul, Peter Jooste, who had set up small projects to counsel addicts and start food gardens. Cooper informed Jooste that to become a pilot site he needed to find 1 000 people who would be divided into smaller work teams of a hundred at ten sites.

Jooste also learnt that people could work in the areas of engineering, agriculture, environment, home-based care, school clean-ups and general community support. They would get R50 a day and work for eight days a month.

Jooste, showing extraordinary energy, within two weeks recruited 1 000 workers from the community including 40 supervisors (one per 25 workers) who are paid an extra R25 a day. He also recruited his wife, a

former Absa administrator, to do the project administration and he found a former social worker to assist with the planning of projects. Trained plumbers in the community also offered their services at below what they had formerly earned.

The municipality made the final decision about who was included and facilitators ensured that councillors did not use the project for their own political or financial purposes.

There were however delays as the IDT, a development agency working for government, saw the EPWP as duplicating its work. The EPWP was driven from the presidency with the aim of rapidly rolling out jobs which the IDT was not able to do. Ultimately government agreed that the IDT would get 10% of the budget for its own programmes but would not manage the EPWP.

By April 2009, finance for Welkom was available and the project began.

WORKING FOR THE COMMUNITY

A defining feature of the Welkom programme is that local people have taken ownership.

The project has been remarkably free of infighting that often plagues development initiatives where resources are available. Despite 3 000 unemployed people in the area, and only 1 000 public works jobs on offer, the community managed to agree and list who should be employed. The low pay and short period of employment has meant that the gap between the employed and unemployed has not created hostility.

The EPWP has been low key in its implementation. Organisers have taken care to be honest with people and to explain the programme carefully and what they can expect of it.

Yet this low remuneration has unleashed a strong ethos of 'helping the community'. Working on their doorstep has struck a deep chord with workers and some are willing to do more than their eight days of



The Project Manager, Peter Jooste, addressing Community Public Works participants in Welkom in May this year.

work. There are also skilled people who have chosen to work in the community rather than seek higher wages elsewhere because they find the environment more meaningful and pleasant.

There is excitement about the opportunity to serve the community. Such work is preferable to waiting on the side of the road for a truck to take people to work on a farm for a pittance. It is also a more creative process than passively receiving a government grant. In fact in Brazil social grants are conditional on people performing a civic duty such as cleaning the streets.

The lack of infighting is partly due to the unifying influence of the church. Jooste does not represent a particular party, nor is he ambitious for himself. It is a local initiative that moves at its own pace. No-one dictates what should be done. It is an innovative programme which has found its own rhythm.

This does not mean however that people do not work hard to make it a success. The 120 supervisors across the Welkom sites, for example, meet every Friday to talk about their work, problems and resolutions. This is an important support structure. They discuss, for example, what to do if people come drunk to work. They see this as a community problem that needs to be jointly solved. It has resulted in people from the community running small groups to

assist with the problem of drink and drugs.

The programme has been so successful that Jooste is now working with the nearby town of Ventersburg to recruit another 1000 people to participate in the EPWP.

Jooste is aware that the programme is temporary and that the community needs to work towards more sustainable livelihoods. To this end people are being trained to become social entrepreneurs and to effectively distribute such things as condoms, and cooking groups are learning how to bottle extra produce. Jooste has encouraged people to set up small entrepreneur groups and to find the training they need for activities they want to engage in.

ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Fifty other projects exist elsewhere, and although Welkom has been a particular success, most other communities have also achieved improvements. Problems that have arisen have mostly been related to poor administration.

The administration is made as uncomplicated as possible. A roll call is taken at the different work sites and attendance registers with people's details are submitted to the provincial IDT. Money is paid directly into workers' bank accounts. This centralised system ensures dignity as the payment is separated from a

supervisor who may act as if wages are a favour.

Where people need training or guidance there is a network of non-governmental and other organisations that offer help. People are trained in such things as trench gardening and how to make compost to make it unnecessary to buy fertiliser.

About 75% of people in the programmes are women and in Welkom, for example, 60% are under 35 years old.

The EPWP operates in both rural and urban areas, wherever there is poverty. In the urban context there are about 60 000 people taking part in programmes around Gauteng, Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg. By the end of April 2011, 87 000 will be participating and the target is 220 000 by 2014.

In rural areas the programmes have allowed people to visit the elderly in far flung places where they have often been deeply shocked at their conditions. From a tiny spark the improvement in people's lives has been significant (see box).

The reduction in crime has been noticeable wherever the EPWP exists. In Bokfontein, for example, there were two murders a week prior to the programme. Now there are about two murders every six months.

This new pride in community arises from the dignity that people get through work. There is plenty of work to be done so why shouldn't everyone have work? The right to work with some kind of remuneration exists, for example, in the constitution in India (See SALB 31.3 'Politics of the right to work in India: Employment Guarantee Schemes'). It is a right that everyone should have. The Public Works Programme represents a re-definition of work as there is no longer any guarantee that all South Africans will have access to formal work. LE

David Cooper is managing director of Teba Development.

Lusikisiki Community Works Programme

Mcobothini and Mevana are poverty stricken villages in Lusikisiki. They are dominated by unemployed youths as a result of lack of skills. Unemployment leads to increased crime. Most of the unemployed youths are primary and secondary school drop-outs. Many get employed by Indian businesses for approximately R20 to R30 a day, doing huge amounts of work which shows they are being exploited.

The Community Works Programme (CWP), according to participants, has made a huge difference in their lives. Some say that they have been involved in crime but are now newly-made as a result of this programme, they no longer steal or hijack. They also assert that no-one sleeps without food anymore.

Some are now breadwinners for their families. Those who have children say theirs now look like other children at school as they have proper uniforms.

Others, who have been totally dependent on the child grant, which is not sufficient to cover needs, say they can now add to that grant to make a better life for their families.

Young people no longer bother their grandparents with requests for money to buy soap and underwear. One said that they now have money to pay their *umqombothi* [beer] debts.

The CWP has taken them out of taverns where they used to spend the whole day, doing absolutely nothing.

A person that knew the youths before, when they were dirty, suffering from loss of hope, and filled with despair, can now tell the difference as happiness and satisfaction is written on their faces.

They are also helped in terms of skills. They have gained knowledge on planting crops, road maintenance and health services and on how to assist sick and injured people. They are now nurses and doctors of the community. Training in agriculture and social work gives them skills for life. It will also help them get jobs, as they are now employable.

Importantly this programme has helped the community as a whole. Old people who have had no-one to clean their clothes and dishes now have help. It was hard for grannies to get water from the rivers as they were far, but now they have people to get water. People who cannot go to clinics due to transport problems now receive assistance at their homes.

Schools are fenced and cleaned like never before.

This programme has brought change to the lives of everyone in the community, as no one is living on his or her own island. I decided to take part voluntarily in this programme when I realised as a tertiary student that indeed change comes from action.

There can never be transformation in the lives of people if they don't wake up from their slumbers and take action themselves. Stones remain unturned 'til someone comes and turns them up. When people take action, they change their lives and also the lives of others in the community and all in society.

The government should continue with this programme. It should not be stopped; instead more days of work should be added.

Nceba Ntshongwana is a student at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. He participates in the CWP working with others on home-based care, agriculture and construction tasks.