

Council partners in the Eastern Cape

The giraffes and elephants quietly grazing in South Africa’s Doubledrift Game Reserve seem incongruous partners for local government and economic development experts from Oxfordshire, England. But partners they are, in a complex and demanding project designed to reduce poverty in this beautiful corner of the Eastern Cape, where unemployment levels exceed 80 per cent, reports Anne Page.



The principal partners in this North/South collaboration are Oxfordshire County Council and Nkonkobe Municipality. Exercising their role as community leaders, and with funding from DFID, they have brought together associates from neighbouring authorities, local institutes of higher education, and local businesses, to bring about improvements in the South African setting.

They aim to:

- restore and improve the area’s tourism infrastructure
- enhance the capacity of local government and local tourism bodies to attract visitors and investment
- create jobs and generate small and medium sized businesses

Nkonkobe municipality and its big sister authority, Amatole District Council, form one-sixth of the Eastern Cape Province — one of the poorest, least known but most magnificent corners of South Africa. Amatole covers most of the former apartheid “state” of the Ciskei — stretching from the coastal city of East London inland to the Amatole mountains. Sustainable tourism can clearly lift the standard of living throughout the area — rich as it is with both natural and cultivated resources.

< Adrenaline — one of the women's groups helped by the project's micro-credit and employment activities

Keith Borien from Oxfordshire and Msi Silinga from the University of Fort Hare discuss the project



But at present intending visitors must work hard to fulfil their basic transport and accommodation requirements, let alone to find their way between the many sites of interest. Local people are missing out on the income-generating activities associated with an increase in discerning visitors. It's hard even to buy a postcard.

However, following briefing visits in Nkonkobe and Oxfordshire, and three workshops in South Africa, Mr Lubabalo Gwintsa, Nkonkobe's Acting Municipal Manager, can already see two main benefits of this project: "the revitalisation of our small towns, which had been degenerating at an alarming rate; and the creation of jobs for our communities."

He says: "The confidence invoked in our business sector has been phenomenal – because of the anchor in tourism. People now acknowledge that for tourism to prosper we need to create a conducive environment: clean towns, improved infrastructure for residents and visitors – and of course economic growth.

"Through this project, the municipality has become more aggressive in addressing the problems confronting our principal town of Alice. There has been a huge impact on our grass cutting, drainage cleaning and infrastructure rehabilitation. We have employed 230 extra people to clean our heritage sites to prepare for their restoration.

"We have also secured funding for one extra tourism post, and two further staff in the town planning"

Sustainable tourism strategy

More can be expected, now that the British and South African staff have completed a major tourism strategy for Nkonkobe to put to provincial and national government, the Eastern Cape Tourist Board, and private interests, large and small.

The strategy aims for a sustainable tourism industry in Nkonkobe with allied local economic and social

benefits. It suggests ways to promote craft centres and other small businesses, and to boost heritage awareness and conservation.

Routes are being designed which will cover hundreds of square miles, to unite the historic sites and buildings of the Xhosa, colonial and apartheid eras in a series of heritage trails. These are aimed at helping both visitors and residents – especially those too young to know of their parents' oppressive experience – to increase their understanding of the area.

"Routes are being designed which will cover hundreds of square miles to unite historic sites"

Existing attractions have been carefully audited – and include not only the scenery and ecology, the game reserves and wild life, but also the small town museums, the Forts built by the British in their battles against the Xhosa people, the centres of the popular struggle against apartheid, and the exceptional collection of contemporary African art allied to the National Liberation Archives, at the University of Fort Hare.

New requirements have been specified: for visitor information centres; effective information management; further audit; and training.

Ubuntu

Oxfordshire's long experience in dealing with visitors from across the world to the City of Oxford and to historic rural corners of the county has eased the collaboration of the different personalities, context and practice in South Africa. And Oxfordshire staff and elected members have also profited from the chance for unique personal development and experience.

Everyone involved – librarians, museum curators, university lecturers, school teachers, property specialists, tourism and micro-credit consultants – has testified to a life-changing time. They now use a new word from the Xhosa language – ubuntu – roughly translating as 'humanity' or 'humaneness', learned from their South African hosts. They have also learned about the stoicism and creativity of the Xhosa people during successive persecution and defeats; and their leadership in the processes of reconciliation and building a new, democratic South Africa.

Staff on both sides have been used to working closely with their local institutions and this has continued into the project.

From Oxfordshire,

- West Oxfordshire District Council has given advice and support on all aspects of tourism, marketing and the creation of visitor information centres.
- Oxford Brookes University has been providing advice on strategic tourism development, capacity building, and training; and
- Atkins, the global property and engineering consultants, have been assisting with the conservation of historic buildings, building design and maintenance.

In Nkonkobe, the partners have included:

- Amatole District Municipality – helping with tourism development and marketing
- Tshani Consulting, the project delivery arm of the South African Department of Environment and Tourism
- and the University of Fort Hare (alma mater to Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, among other leaders), offering local capacity-building and training of various kinds, ICT and other academic support.



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The university is the major employer in the area, with a strong community leadership ethic as part of its own mission. Its art collection and the National Liberation Archives are attractions in themselves, but to continue to draw staff and students to this relatively remote rural campus, the university needs much more vibrant economic and social activity in its neighbourhood. Thus, it can see the potential benefits of this project.

Unforeseen benefits

Both sides of the 30 partnerships so far under way in the CLGF Good Practice Scheme, including the UK/Africa partnerships, report unforeseen benefits in addition to those planned. This one is no exception.

For instance, Oxford Brookes is currently establishing a scholarship fund to support exchange students from Fort Hare, especially those wishing to pursue higher level study in tourism. Other joint ideas include:

- a tourism degree programme at the University of Fort Hare, with Brookes providing consultancy on issues such as curriculum development
- “flying faculty” to assist each side with teaching on tourism programmes
- staff exchanges for personal development
- exchange programmes, where students might spend one term at the partner university accumulating credits towards their degrees
- establishing a joint degree between both institutions

Planners of Fort Hare University’s proposed new archive building are learning from Atkins’ work with Oxfordshire on their new County Archive, and from other archival projects that the firm has undertaken.

Atkins are willing to sponsor South African students through engineering and architectural studies at Fort Hare University, either with individual sponsorship, or by prizes given for high achievement in school competitions. The company will also offer industrial placements for students at Fort Hare with their 14,000 staff in offices across the world. They want to organise job shops and office-sharing with other property consultants in South Africa, to permit expansion and exchange of knowledge and capability.

“Both sides of the partnership report unforeseen benefits”

Other unforeseen benefits have come from the presence on one visit of a waste management expert, accompanying his wife, an Oxfordshire museums specialist. The Nkonkobe waste management officials took advantage of this to seek his views. Since his return to Oxfordshire, he has taken steps to bring Nkonkobe staff to the UK, to shadow his own work force.

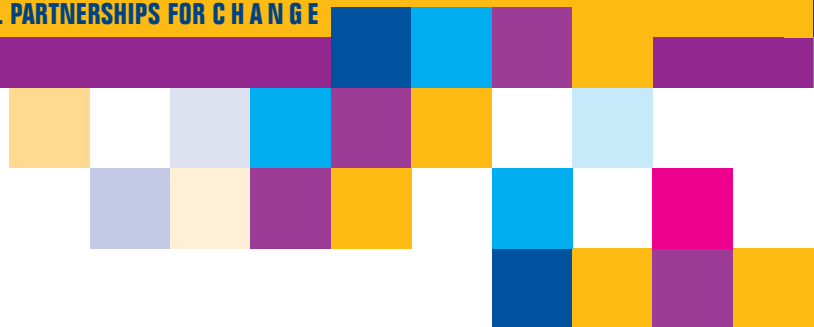
Paul Boateng, the British High Commissioner in Pretoria, joined DFID in finding funding, extra to the project, for a micro-credit scheme. This allowed a British specialist to live in Nkonkobe for three months. Expert in preparing women entrepreneurs to enlarge their markets, she was able to contact 140 women craft workers to establish and develop new businesses. This “Masambe” micro-credit project has since seen the appointment of a local project worker, and another will be appointed shortly.

Embedding the new tourism strategy and developments in the community has been central to the project. To this end, Oxfordshire personnel have worked with South African museum staff, school teachers and children to build their living heritage curriculum - planning better school use of local museums and the introduction of community theatre.

Strengthening community leadership

South Africa’s constitution lays heavy duties on its local government both to deliver effective practical services, and to strengthen all kinds of community leadership.

In this project, the role of Nkonkobe Municipality, closely collaborating with Amatole District Council, has been crucial in bringing and keeping together all the partners, both local and international. The project has coincided with major changes affecting the local authority, and with campaigns for the recent local government elections. Rising to the challenges, however, Mr Gwintsa and his team have sustained their own leadership roles, and enhanced those of their local associates.



This project, along with other good practice schemes, can be seen as a blueprint for partnerships between the UK and Africa. Starting with modest government funding for council-to-council collaboration and local leadership, the involvement of the private sector and two first class universities has helped the project go from strength to strength. People in one area, with the support of people and organisations in others, become agents for change, responsible for their own development.

Anne Page accompanied a delegation from Oxfordshire to South Africa on one of their visits under the project.

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The project is part of the UK Government Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Commonwealth Local Government Good Practice Scheme, which has been managed by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, over the past seven years. Local authorities, mostly from the UK and Africa, have been working together on a range of practical activities aimed at improving the quality, and impact on people’s lives, of local government services in South Africa, India, Ghana and Jamaica.



< The Nkonkobe tourism strategy will help to promote craft centres and other small businesses