

Beekeepers demonstrate resilience during Covid-19

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A Sappi-sponsored programme that helps communities adjacent to forestry plantations to become beekeepers, has shown some unexpectedly encouraging results during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Non-profit consultant and founder of the African Honey Bee programme, Guy Stubbs, who has more than 30 years' experience in small and micro-enterprise development, was struck by the incredible resilience being demonstrated by the families that have been part of this beekeeping project. Collectively, since the beginning of the year, the participating families have harvested about five tonnes of honey, earning close to R360,000 despite the national lockdown.



During a recent survey undertaken in the Sokhulu community in KwaZulu-Natal (north of Richards Bay), where the project has been running for the last couple of years and a new community in Thembaletu, Mpumalanga where training had not yet begun, Guy noticed some marked differences in people's approach to the situation brought about by the international health crisis. "While the families in Thembaletu were watching TV and waiting for the government to hand out food parcels, the 100 families that we interviewed in Sokhulu were producing and even selling vegetables, chickens, eggs and honey," he says. "All 100 families were producing honey, 85 were growing vegetables, 27 were producing eggs and 39 were producing chickens for meat," he says.

Sappi Southern Africa's general manager communications Mpho Lethoko comments: "The approach of this beekeeping project we support is based on our overall philosophy of supporting ABCD (Asset Based Community Development) in our communities. Most of these beekeeping families participate in our Sappi Khulisa supplier programme and are already part of the valuable forestry supply chain. By learning to harvest honey, grow vegetables and produce poultry and eggs they are not just producing food to feed their own families, but many of them are also supplementing the income they make from selling us their timber, by also selling this produce," she says.

The survey into how they were coping with the challenge of Covid-19, was aimed at measuring the impact of this method of poverty alleviation - which African Honeybee had been developing since they launched the beekeeping project in 2016 with Sappi as their main stakeholder, along with funding from the government of Flanders and the IDC. The initial goal of establishing 125 beekeepers was soon surpassed and by the end of 2019 there were 1,600 families involved in the project on different levels; with some 900 keeping bees and a further 400 hunting honey without starting uncontrolled fires; and with some 400 participating in self-help groups that save and invest in new income generating activities and a further 300 involved in other income-generating activities.

Because Guy and his team were involved in essential services, they were able to issue their staff with permits when the national lockdown was imposed, which enabled them to continue with the project. The house in the Sappi Village in

KwaMbonambi, which is used in the project for the extraction and processing of the honey collected from the beekeepers, was used to convene small Covid-19 compliant meetings. “We obviously couldn’t meet in large numbers so in consultation with the savings group members, just the chairperson, secretary and treasurer of each group would meet separately, while other members would submit their savings via letter. All wore masks, sanitised before each meeting and strictly observed social distancing,” says Guy.

Refilwe Ramohaladi, the savings group facilitator, reports that the self-help savings groups are helping a lot of people now during Covid-19 because they have money to start their own businesses that can earn them money, or savings that are helping them get by. “There is so much need because many of the people who had jobs in the city, and have lost them, come home and are hungry,” she says.

While conducting the survey, Guy also reports that he was greatly encouraged by the fact that he was welcomed by a literal hive of activity in Sokhulu, where participants in the project were busy harvesting honey, growing vegetables, producing eggs and poultry and people were proud to show him what they were growing or producing. “It was such a contrast to the visit that I had to Thembaletu where the greetings were from families who were all asking for financial assistance of some kind,” he says.

One such successful Sokhulu entrepreneur is Sandiso Maghabi who says: “My clients have grown during Covid-19 because they can buy good quality meat right here in Sokhulu. I’m now farming with 50 chickens every two months.” This is confirmed as one of his clients, Nkosinathi Khumalo arrives to buy a chicken. “I buy my chickens from Sandiso because then I don’t have to take the taxi to KwaMbonambi. His chickens also taste fresh,” says Nkosinathi.

Guy sees the success of this project - from living in a state of dependency to becoming self-sustaining and sustainable - as a solution that could be replicated elsewhere in the country. “We, as a country, could come out of this pandemic as a nation strengthened at its core if families can produce their own food, and even make some money from selling the excess. They will be far less reliant on social grants and food parcels,” he says.

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About African Honeybee programme

African Honey Bee (AHB) is a South African Christian not-for-profit organisation that enables families from severely disadvantaged rural communities to establish self-help savings groups through, which they build sustainable, climate-smart, income-generating enterprises.

In addition to free-range eggs, chicken meat and organic vegetables and fruit, the families also produce raw traceable honey of unrivalled taste and quality, using environmentally friendly and ethical beekeeping practices. AHB was recently recognised for the work that they do, winning the Social Innovation award for Income Generation at the Community Chest Impumelelo Social Innovations Awards.

For more information visit <https://www.africanhoneybee.co.za/>

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