

Covid-19 pandemic: How UbuntuCare is helping women in impoverished areas earn an income

Thanks to non-profit initiative UbuntuCare, more than 300,000 cloth masks have been distributed to vulnerable communities throughout the Western Cape. The initiative is a public-private partnership of The Health Foundation South Africa, Western Cape Government Department of Health through its WoW! (WesternCape on Wellness) programme, Infection Control Africa Network, clothing manufacturer Coconut Jazz, and Project Last Mile.



Members of the Witzenberg community in the Cape Winelands District show their gratitude for the recent donation of UbuntuCare cloth masks.

UbuntuCare gives women in impoverished areas the opportunity to produce masks and earn an income to support their families. The project is ongoing, and well over 400,000 masks will have been manufactured by mid-January. The initiative was born at the start of lockdown at which point only a handful of seamstresses from Elsies River, Grabouw and Philippi had been employed. The women received training on how to make cloth masks according to international specifications and within months, thanks to the support from retailers, funders and the public, more than 280 seamstresses are now involved in the project.

Public health and social purpose

Fiona Hoadley, UbuntuCare partner says many of these women barely generate enough income to survive under normal circumstances: “The initiative has provided them with the income they need to take care of their families while working on something with a public health and social purpose. To see the initiative grow and expand as it has within seven short months has simply been remarkable. I think the pandemic has created a much broader understanding and empathy for the needs of others. The response from both public and private sectors bears testament to a genuine desire to help vulnerable communities during these trying times and we are grateful for their support.”

Mitchell’s Plain seamstress Sandra Jones says all her work dried up during lockdown. After months of receiving no income she didn’t know how she was going to feed her children, let alone keep her little business afloat. “Out of the blue I received a call from Fiona to find out if I’d like to make masks for the initiative. Since then I’ve been able to provide additional sewing work for four other ladies – most of whom are grandmothers. The project has been such a blessing to us.”

Amanda Myoli, a mother of four from Khayelitsha was equally desperate, but after responding to a call out for community seamstresses, she got involved with UbuntuCare. “The opportunity was a lifesaver, not only for me, but other women in the community as well. I now employ 17 seamstresses and packers. We make about 2,500 masks per week and could be making more if we had another overlocker.”

Lizette Cronje from Elsie's Rivier had to put her events and catering business on hold over the last year due to Covid-19 and had to make a plan fast. “When I heard about the mask-making initiative, I shifted gears and quickly learnt how to sew masks and involved other women in Elsie's who were also struggling to make ends meet. The 15 of us – mostly single moms and women close to retirement age – produce 4,500 masks a week. The opportunity has given each of us a renewed sense of purpose. It has meant the world to us and our families!”



The Klipfontein community were also recipients of UbuntuCare masks.

Beneficiary communities

Rural communities in the Cape Winelands, Overberg, West Coast, Garden Route and Central Karoo Districts, as well as those in Khayelitsha, Tygerberg, Klipfontein and Mitchell's Plain have been among the beneficiaries of UbuntuCare masks.

Elderly residents from more than 80 old age homes across the province now no longer have to recycle their limited supply of masks – many of which have come apart already – thanks to several thousand masks that were donated through UbuntuCare.

Dr Frederick Marais, deputy director for WoW!, says the dynamic partnership has enabled the Western Cape Government to respond rapidly to communities who are faced with Covid-19 challenges. “The response to Covid-19 requires collective actions, and our valued partners have made this possible. They have provided a lifeline to many living in vulnerable communities – both in terms of employment and through the distribution of masks.”

Harry Grainger, CEO of The Health Foundation South Africa says UbuntuCare seamstresses are working round the clock to get enough masks out to those who desperately need them. “With additional sponsorship and mask sales, the network of seamstresses will be expanded to distribute even more masks and at the same time create more job opportunities.

“Having access to quality cloth masks is key in preventing the spread of the Covid-19 infection, particularly in vulnerable communities. Those most in need include low income families, the elderly and people living with chronic diseases. While thousands of masks have been distributed, the need is great and we ask for the public’s continued support,” says Grainger.

How to help

With the purchase of every two-pack UbuntuCare mask, another will be donated to a community in need. UbuntuCare masks are available at Clicks and Dis-chem stores and can also be ordered online via www.ubuntucare.org. All funds raised, whether through mask sales or financial donations, are channelled back into the project to ensure that all monies are used for the procurement of masks.

By mid next year, UbuntuCare aims to employ over 400 seamstresses and other craftspeople towards sustained community development. Once the need for masks abates, the initiative will continue to work with the same communities under the UbuntuCare umbrella to facilitate skills upliftment, routes to market and access to mainstream consumers to ensure a continued stream of income.

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