



A dent in the despair



BY LUCILLE DAVIE

The sprawling shack settlement of Ivory Park once epitomised hopelessness. But since 1999, small but steady dents have been made in that despair, thanks to initiatives that have looked more closely at the damaged environment and how local people could live more harmoniously with it.

Ivory Park is midway between Johannesburg and Pretoria, to the east of Midrand. Half the Ivory Park community are unemployed; those who are employed earn on average less than R800 per month.

Serious environmental problems have taken their toll on the health of the community members. Coal is used for cooking, causing respiratory problems. A highly polluted river – more polluted than water reaching sewage farms – runs through the area. The pipes feeding the area are riddled with leaks, with 30% of the water residents pay for going to waste.

A hopeless situation by anyone's standards. But in the early nineties two incidents occurred that were to change the township: a dangerous chemical fire broke out at a nearby warehouse and a hazardous waste dump was proclaimed for an adjoining neighbourhood.

Earthlife Africa heard of these incidents, and offered assistance. A community forum was established, which lobbied the Danish Agency for Environment and Development for funding, and was given R11-million.

The result was the Midrand EcoCity Trust. One of its first jobs was to commission a State of the Environment report to examine existing conditions in Midrand, the broader area encompassing Ivory Park and other nearby townships.

The report gives an overview of the environmental situation in Midrand, including pollution statistics for air, water, land and noise, as well as detailed recommendations for the area.

The EcoCity Initiative came out of this. It is an effort to create a local economy along sustainable development principles, where the community create their own jobs by growing organic vegetables; cleaning their environment and managing the waste. The community are also educated on enviro-friendly living.

"The EcoCity Initiative is a holistic programme, addressing poverty from a community, social and economic development level," says Anne Sugrue, MD of the Midrand EcoCity Trust.

The secret to the success of the initiative was community involvement by means of co-operatives, reinforced by a need to eradicate local health problems. Women and young people were targeted, creating jobs for them and focusing their energies on their immediate surroundings.

"It is anticipated that this approach will lead to a sustainable local economy that is less dependent on outside inputs and capital intensity," adds Sugrue.

A number of innovative projects are in place and working smoothly:

Over 70 farmers, mostly women, are growing organic food for the community. Six agricultural co-operatives have been formed. Forty people have been employed in waste collection and waste sorting. Ten people are employed in making paper from waste paper and alien vegetation. An eco village consisting of 30 houses is partially built. Some 14





women have been trained in eco-building technologies like grey waste water treatment and water harvesting.

A pilot project involving the Ecocity and Eskom, and using various energy efficient measures in houses in the area, is up and running. It involves installing insulated ceilings, geyser jackets, long-life, low-voltage light bulbs, and solar water heaters. Residents' reactions confirm savings in energy costs, and the programme is being expanded.

Smokeless braziers have been introduced in an effort to reduce air pollution in homes and the broader community.

A six kilometre bicycle track linking schools in the area is being built, with funding of R1-million from the department of transport. Eight young people have been running a bicycle refurbishment and sales workshop, importing used bikes from the UK, Holland, the US and China. Some 1 200 school children have undergone an edu-bike programme, and an Ivory Park Racing Bike Association has been formed, with 30 youngsters training and entering cycle races like The Argus and the 94.7 kilometre Johannesburg race.

"What we have tried to demonstrate is that there is a different way of creating jobs," explains Sugrue. So far 150 jobs have been created. There are plans to build a zero-energy community centre and an energy demonstration centre, as part of the broader EcoCity concept. Pamphlets, brochures, a photo exhibition and a short video are being prepared, detailing the concept, in preparation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in August. These will be on display at the energy demonstration centre.

Over 800 Ivory Park school children have undergone an educational programme to raise awareness on sustainable development and its relevance to their lives. This resulted in a cleanest school competition, an ongoing feature of the area.

And the cherry on top: the polluted Kaalspruit, the river which runs through the township, is to be cleaned up.

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