

THUSONG — BRINGING HOPE TO SMALL TOWNS

Small towns such as Burgersdorp, Oviston, Steynsburg and Venterstad subsist off the beaten track. The local Community Work Programme is creating work opportunities and stimulating entrepreneurship in an area where unemployment is rife – and even boosting the coffers of the local municipality.

There is a stark beauty to the Free State and northern Eastern Cape. It's a part of South Africa that has inspired thousands of paintings – a vast rural landscape with potholed roads rolling down escarpments into countless plateaus, punctuated by windmills, mountain ranges and the occasional farmhouse.

Settlements are few and far between. Neighbours can be many kilometers away. Small forgotten towns such as Burgersdorp, Oviston, Steynsburg and Venterstad subsist quietly out of sight. This was once burgeoning farm country, full of grazing livestock. From a distance the townships and towns are distinct and clear. Iron sheets of RDP housing reflect the harsh sun on one side of the road, while a neighbouring hamlet rests in the shade of large trees on the other. From afar they are enticing, but up close they are empty. Farmers have left the area, taking with them the money that kept the economies of these small towns going. Farm workers have also moved one or now sit in townships unemployed.

If convenience stores are a barometer of small communities, the outlook for Venterstad is grim. As Marlet Nel, Thusong area CWP facilitator, explains, "there isn't even a PEP here". What does prevail is a high unemployment rate, alcoholism, poverty and dilapidated buildings. As the farmers shut up shop and moved out, only ex-farm workers, stragglers and those who couldn't afford to leave, stayed.

Municipalities are bankrupt and schools, roads and public works crumble at a faster rate than they are repaired. In this area, the CWP not only provides a number of members with a regular income, but also supplies a number of services that are gladly received.

Venterstad, Steynsburg and Burgersdorp are of a similar size and suffer from similar problems. One area that CWP have focused on is beautifying entrances to the towns, cleaning public spaces and renovating public buildings, schools, cemeteries and sports grounds. In the townships CWP work is more focused on agricultural development instead of beautification. Nearby Oviston is a small ramshackle community on the edge of the Gariep Dam. Evidence that it once provided handsomely for tourists and retirees alike is apparent in the drained swimming pool and overgrown tennis courts. Homes originally built for dam workers have become Oviston's township. It is here, as in many other local areas, that benefits of the CWP are physically obvious.

Within many homesteads trenches have been ploughed, ready to be sown with vegetables and grain. The local primary school has been completely re-painted and re-furbished, and feels like a pleasant environment where learners can be proud to study. Before the advent of CWP, the members here would either fish for subsistence or "do nothing".

The knock-on effects of the CWP programme in the Thusong site is clearly evident. Gideon Mapete, Unit Manager of Steynsburg municipality and CWP municipal contact, can undoubtedly see the positives. Not only has there been a small dent made into the unemployment rates, but also a small increase in the income of local government. As CWP members are receiving regular income, more are paying for municipal services, therefore growing coffers and improving the likelihood of better service delivery. Mapete has also noted an increase in grocery shopping on paydays, and also the growth of entrepreneurship via more spaza shops in townships.

Entrepreneurism is also encouraged within the CWP programme. Sharon is a CWP supervisor in Venterstad, and moved her team from cultivating small patches of land in various backyards to a larger corner plot at the entrance of town. It was completely their initiative and so far has worked – to the extent that they are considering turning it into a paying venture and selling vegetables produced in their own time.

Here, they have developed more than 200 trenches for carrots, beetroots, onions, spinach and tomatoes. Sharon and her team have become beneficiaries on both sides of the CWP. They have gained regular employment as well as a small business. When harvested, they plan to sell vegetables at the entrance to Venterstad, and with some of the proceeds buy a hosepipe to allow them to water their investments more effectively.



Sharon's pride is visceral. She leans on the fence protecting her plot, and surveys her land with joy, as a veteran farmer would, not a previously unemployed mother of three. "I am very proud of it," she says, "because I can show the community what talent I have, and also my workers like it and are proud".

Pride is a recurring theme that has grown out of the Thusong CWP site; a commodity that you can't put a price on. CWP participants time and again explain both a dignity achieved with a regular income, and the pride in physically beautifying their homes.

At a CWP refurbished Steynsburg Primary School, after official working hours, CWP supervisor Pitikile Ntsubani sheds light on this effect to the wider community. Before the advent of CWP "the community was crying and today all the town is clean, the people are now proud". As a supervisor Ntsubani can feed his children and if offered a better-paid job putting up telephone lines, as he used to, he claims he would turn it down. "I'm not after the money, I'm after the work," he explains.

Personal and professional development opportunities are scarce, so for the CWP to contribute in this field is a real positive. Agricultural training is provided for supervisors, and facilitators have started asking municipalities in what areas they are lacking. They will then organise for suitable CWP members to be trained, and expect that when the municipality needs skilled workers they will employ them.

There have also been cases where CWP participants have impressed to such an extent, that third parties offer them employment and training opportunities. In Thembisa Township on the outskirts of Burgersdorp, Nombikiso Ntaka was accommodated by Maruping Primary School as a CWP administrative helper. Ntaka proved to be so proficient, that the school has employed her as an admin assistant for the three days in the week that CWP don't employ. She is also receiving computer training from the school.

The most impressive examples of pride through professional development though are from within the ranks of the CWP. Of the sixteen CWP facilitators in the region, four have been promoted from within. One of these is Richard Bambata, who has climbed meteorically through the CWP ranks in 18 months.

Before CWP, Bambata spent his time playing soccer and serving as an executive member on the local football association. It was here, and while playing an integral part in a successful campaign to lower burial rates from R400 to R150, that communal elders noted him as a competent man of action.

Initially selected as a participant, Bambata immediately replaced his errant supervisor and excelled working his team in Burgersdorp and Steynsburg. His abilities were quickly noted, and as the CWP programme expanded, he was promoted to junior facilitator from within. By sticking to his principles of instilling a discipline and strong working ethos in his CWP members, Bambata secured another recent promotion as a senior facilitator. He is now in charge of rolling out the CWP initiative in a new area. Bambata is understandably elated at his status afforded by the opportunity CWP has provided.

Importantly, Bambata, also serves as an example and inspiration to newer CWP participants. They have all seen what integrity, honesty, competency and hard work can achieve within the ranks of CWP. CWP can provide a ladder with which to climb out of the poverty trap.

The Thusong CWP does not promise a miracle. Facilitators don't wave magic wands to make everything better. This area faces severe challenges, that can't be simply washed away. What the CWP does provide is a framework for regular income, and a mechanism for training and further opportunities. Perhaps the most important knock-on effect, however, is the self-esteem that it helps foster within participants and pride in the wider community.



This profile is part of a series that looks at local innovation in the South African government's Community Work Programme (CWP). It was produced by Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS) for the Department of Cooperative Governance (DCoG). For more information about the CWP go to www.cogta.gov.za/cwp.