

## **Simbhademe : A Story of six amaPondo communities reclaiming and redefining their identity**

### **Introduction**

In November 2008, I was invited by Sandy Heather and Simbhademe to evaluate their evolving community development programme on the Pondoland Wild Coast. I welcomed the opportunity this offered of approaching the evaluation from a narrative therapy perspective. The emphasis of the evaluation was on respecting the values and views of the participants from six amaPondo communities, and reporting on the information in ways that affirmed their preferred identity of themselves as strong and powerful and able to influence the course of their future.

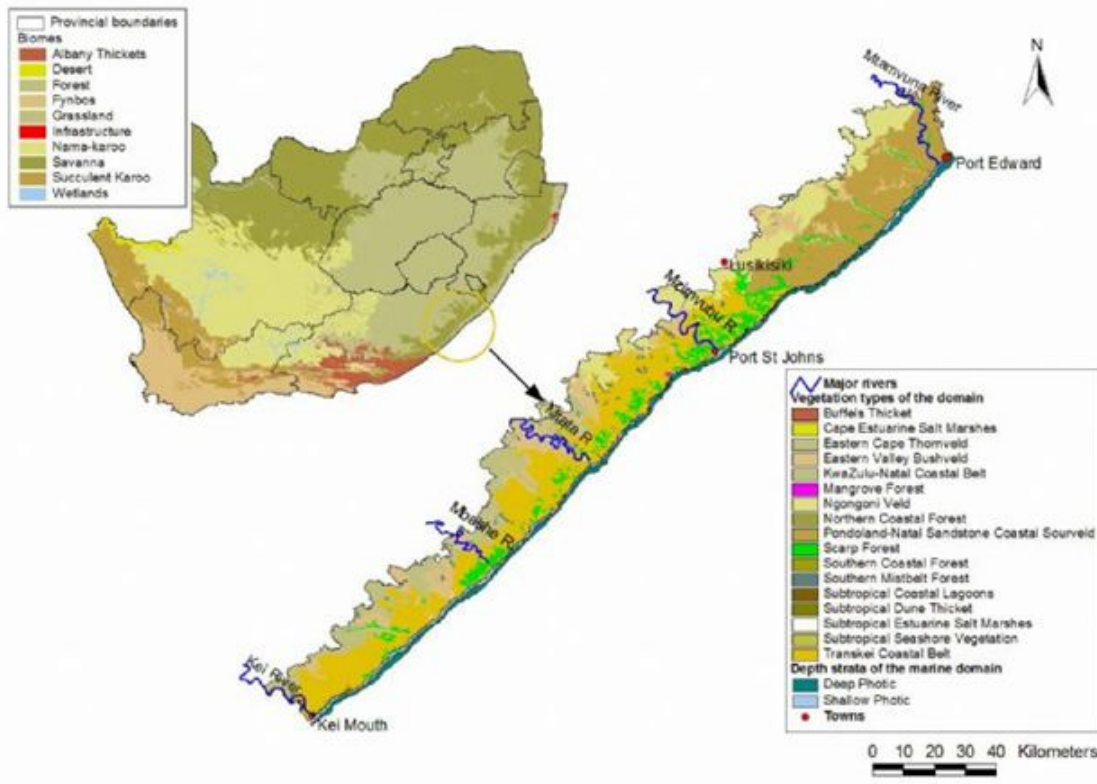
During the evaluation and while I was writing up my report, I was mindful of Michael White's moving and inspiring story, when he visited forty homicide "lifers" in New York's maximum security prison. They were mainly Hispanics and African Americans who, in a heated or trapped moment of youth, killed another person and were paying for it with their own wasted lives. Most had spent fifteen years or more in prison and had no prospect of being released. Michael found it difficult not to form assumptions about these men, especially when he was being searched and subjected to the intimidating process of entering the prison. It made him nervous about what to expect: certainly not the extraordinary time he would spend with them discussing their hopes, regrets and dreams. As an outsider witness, his reflection letter documented their success in creating community within the prison, as well as heartfelt remorse for causing pain to their families and the families of the people they had killed. The dream for many was to return to their communities to work with disaffected youth, who might end up walking the same path these men if they did not receive help. This letter was sent through the prison channels that require all correspondence to be read. One of the surprising outcomes of this procedure was that, within a year, a couple of the reformed "lifers" were paroled. The letter also helped forge links between the prisoners and Aboriginal leaders in Australia who were deeply troubled by criminal activities of disenchanted youth in their communities and were looking for ways to offer young people constructive alternatives.

Michael's story had a deep effect on me. What a brilliant way to influence a system or situation from within. Kaethe Weingarten refers to it as "witnessing". I had been a student in the early seventies in South Africa, the height of the apartheid era, and was all too familiar with protest marches and carrying placards as a way of effecting change. Michael's story alerted me to also finding subtle ways of effecting or supporting positive changes from within. The Simbhademe evaluation provided a valuable opportunity to attempt to put this into practice.

### **Background Information and Location of the Simbhademe Programme**

Sandy Heather is an environmental activist, educationalist and community development facilitator, who spent 2008 working with six rural Pondo farming and fishing communities along an isolated 22km stretch of the Wild Coast from Port Edward to the Mtentu River.

This portion is the least spoilt and arguably the most spectacular coastline in South Africa and amongst the best in the world. There are only half-a-dozen waterfalls in the world that tumble straight into the ocean and half of them are on this coast. The deep gorges with rocky pools and waterfalls contain the Pondoland Centre of Endemism (PCE), a recognized biodiversity hotspot with almost 200 plant species endemic to the area. Though relatively small in extent - about 5% the size of the United Kingdom - the area holds a greater variety of plants than the whole of the UK.



## Location of South Africa's Wild Coast

### Data on the AmaPondo People living along the Wild Coast

Despite the magnificence of the environment, the amaPondo people, who live along the South African Wild Coast, are considered amongst the poorest in the country. This is based on the following conventional measures of poverty:

- 88% of households live below the poverty line.

- 71% of the population is unemployed. (During the current economic crisis this could have risen to 80%)
- There is no electricity in the area.
- 78% of the population is without safe clean drinking water.
- Infrastructure is very poor.
- Schools have minimal facilities. Children walk up to 5 hours to and from school each day.
- 26% of the population has no schooling and only 2% percent of the people have completed high school. The drop-out rate is extremely high.
- People walk 2-3 hours to get to the nearest clinic.
- Road conditions are shocking. It takes over two hours to cover a distance of 40km that should take 20 minutes. During the rainy season most roads are impassable.

### **Primary Narrative Therapy Principle: Avoid Assumptions**

*Narrative Therapy emphasizes the importance of avoiding assumptions. This was probably the single most important principle to hold on to during the evaluation. Based on the above bleak statistics, it would be easy to assume that the Xolobeni amaPondo are the stereotypical powerless, uneducated, rural poor we so often read about. Many villagers might even have viewed themselves like this a few years ago. That is, until they found themselves embroiled in the centre of a fierce dune mining battle against a foreign company. This engagement forced many changes in the way people view themselves and their environment and, inadvertently, resulted in the formation of Simbhademe.*

### **The Simbhademe Programme**

“Simbhademe” means ‘we discover’ in amaPondo, the name created by the participants of the community development programme facilitated by Sandy Heather. It cleverly utilises letters from each of the six communities where the programme is active, viz. **Sigidi, Mabaleni, Mdatya, Mpinweni, Mtolani, Mtentu.** (An ‘h’ was added).

From its inception, Sandy’s approach has been to listen carefully to everyone in order to build trust and rapport, and to determine the needs of the participants and their communities so that an appropriate programme could be developed by The Team. The Team comprises herself and several promising local people who are part of the

Simbhademe programme. They provide valuable cultural advice and assist with facilitating workshops, discussions and training.

The approach used is based largely on Training for Transformation<sup>1</sup>, which trusts that communities know what is best for them and that sustainable development involves responding to and working with the needs and solutions developed by a community, and not imposing ideas from the outside.

When Sandy started engaging with the six communities, the people were very aware that they needed information and knowledge to empower them to make their own decisions based on an holistic understanding of their constitutional rights and responsibilities and other relevant legislation. They also wanted knowledge about ecosystem services, conservation and rehabilitation practices, and range of other topics. Learning was experiential and involved discussions, workshops and visits to existing projects to learn and to avoid repeating mistakes. At the time of the evaluation, each community had decided to implement two human-scale development<sup>2</sup> projects that would become self-sustaining within three years. One was a food security project, while second choices supported a local plan to improve eco-tourism in the area. All projects had a conservation component and ranged from mussel stock rehabilitation to developing a camp-site.

Simbhademe is committed to developing eco-tourism and cultural tourism along the Pondoland Wild Coast, but their dream is threatened by the spectre of dune mining and the N2 toll road that will devastate the sense of place and much of their communal land.

### **Proposed Dune Mining and the N2 Toll Road**

The Xolobeni area includes a stretch of beautiful red dunes, rich in titanium and other heavy metals. The mining rights to these deposits belong to Transworld Energy Minerals (TEM), a subsidiary of the Australian group Mineral Resources Commodities (MRC). In Australia and New Zealand TEM has had to discontinue many heavy mineral mining operations along the coast in line with their stringent environmental policies.

This raises serious moral and ethical questions. Is it right for TEM to conduct a mining operation in South Africa that would probably be forbidden in Australia? What is Australia's responsibility in preventing TEM, through MRC, from coming to South Africa and irreparably damaging one of the most spectacular coastlines in the world and adversely affecting the traditional way of life of the amaPondo, who have occupied the land for centuries and do not want major disruptions to their culture or their way of life?

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<sup>1</sup> For information on Training for Transformation see [www.thegrailcentre.org.za/AboutGrail.htm](http://www.thegrailcentre.org.za/AboutGrail.htm)

<sup>2</sup> The human-scale development model was proposed by Prof Manfred Max-Neef, a Chilean economist, who has visited South Africa and spoken at Stellenbosch University.

The dune mining operation and the associated N2 free way will also have devastating impacts on the eco-tourism developments proposed by the Xolobeni communities.

The extensive N2 free way is intended to improve road links between KZN and the Eastern Cape by eliminating the dangerous section of road from Flagstaff to Mthatha. Although alternative alignments have been recommended, the preferred route for the N2 toll road crosses six major gorges causing inestimable damage to the associated river systems and natural environment. It also passes through community land, where it will destroy thousands of acres of rich agricultural and grazing lands. The road will change the way of life of the amaPondo people forever. The preferred route passes suspiciously close to the proposed mining area and would conveniently service heavy vehicles and other transport associated with the proposed titanium mine. Despite a flood of objections, the government seems determined to go ahead with the proposed N2.

### **Focus of the Evaluation**

In addition to gathering quantifiable information for the evaluation, the focus was on the qualitative value of Simbhademe's achievements and how this changed the way the participants thought about themselves and their communities. Questions asked included:

- What do you appreciate most about the Simbhademe programme and what makes this so important to you?
- In what ways has the Simbhademe programme changed you, other participants and your community?
- In what ways has the culture and identity of the amaPondo people on the Wild Coast been enhanced by the programme?
- Tell me about important lessons you learned from working with Simbhademe and how this has helped you deal with situations in your community?
- Tell me about how plans and objectives were adapted during the project to accommodate changing needs of the participants and the six communities?
- How do the Wild Coast communities view these projects and what changes would they still like to see?
- What is and what is not working for the participants and the communities covered by the project?
- In what ways can the work be strengthened, improved and expanded upon during the next five years?
- In what ways had this programme had wider significance in the region?
- To what extent have local linkages been made and to what effect?
- To what extent have relationships been developed with traditional leaders and with local and provincial government departments and to what effect?

### **Narrative Therapy: Thickening the preferred identity of the amaPondo people**

*In my discussions with the Xolobeni communities, I gathered information about how they view themselves based on oral history and stories handed down from the past. One interesting discussion explored how these stories influence the way people see themselves in the present situation and the stance they have adopted in response to the proposed mining and N2 toll road.*

### **The amaPondo people's view of themselves**

According to the history related to me, the amaPondo people are peace-loving agriculturalists and cattle farmers, who have extremely strong ties to their land. Most people feel the land has been bequeathed to them by their ancestors and that they must pass it on to their children. For hundreds of years they have lived along this coastline, sandwiched between their cousins, the Xhosa people, to the south, and the powerful Zulus to the north. During King Shaka's reign, Faku, the amaPondo chief, managed to broker a deal with Shaka, the Zulu war-monger, which to this day defies belief. As a result of this deal, the amaPondo were left to live peaceably during one of the most turbulent periods in South Africa's history. However, when pushed to fight, the amaPondo are fierce and formidable adversaries. On the gold mines in Johannesburg, they were unbeatable, especially when they joined forces with the Xhosas.

In 2008, a new story of their courage started unfolding as a result of their vociferous opposition to the proposed mining of the Xolobeni dunes. They marched along the Wild Coast and also confronted Minister Sonjika, the then Minister of Minerals and Energy. Their arrival in force provided clear evidence of their opposition to the proposed mining.

This is not to say everyone is opposed to the mining. Huge profits are at stake. Inflated promises of jobs and other perks, including bribes have confused many of the local people. Influential community leaders, clearly in the pocket of the mining company, have also swayed the minds of people with lies and subterfuge. They feel free to speak on behalf of the amaPondo people, usually to confirm local support for the mining and the toll road. Minister Sonjika spoke about being "mislead" and "misinformed" and publicly apologized for not realizing how many local people opposed the mining. She promised the mining would not go ahead until a proper EIA was conducted and the local people were consulted. A legal complaint had been laid with the former Minister by the community and they now await a response from the new Minister. Similarly with the N2: the public participation process was seriously flawed in that people most affected by the toll road were not consulted. These two events – effectively putting a hold on the mining and forcing the EIA for the N2 to be redone– have been extremely significant in empowering the amaPondo and confirming stories about their formidable strength and courage. These events challenge the discourses and data we typically use to evaluate the relative effectiveness and power of people, particularly those living in rural areas.

### **Modern day AmaPondo Heroes and Sheroes<sup>3</sup>**

The amaPondo people have been involved in a mortal combat, often compared to a David and Goliath battle. Several lives have been lost. Scorpion, an out-spoken activist, is probably the most well-known person to have died but there are many unnamed heroes and she-roes involved in this battle. During the evaluation, we stopped to look at a spectacular gorge. While walking back to the vehicle someone casually mentioned that a week or two ago the body of a man opposed to the mining had been found at the bottom of the gorge. People believe he had been pushed to his death. I was appalled but everyone else took it as a matter of course that people will continue to die until the mining issue is finally resolved.

An 11 minute video *Pondo People* by Don Guy features Nonhle Mbuthuma, a young Pondo woman born and raised according to the ancestral traditions of the amaPondo. It beautifully illustrates her story of emergence from naive innocence to critical consciousness, in reaction to the disruption and upheaval caused by TEM's ambitions to mine amaPondo ancestral lands for heavy minerals. The family has no electricity, running water, jobs, or much formal education but this does not make them disempowered, poor, weak or voiceless. It also does not mean they are in need of outside agencies to propose developments to improve their livelihoods.

In the face of possible death, the Xolobeni communities continue to voice their opposition to the proposed mining. In 2008 and again, on 29 September 2009, given that the Minister has changed, the Amadiba Crisis Committee, through the Legal Resources Centre in Grahamstown, sent a request to the Minister of Minerals and Energy to set aside the Xolobeni mining rights granted to TEM. It takes great courage to make this stand. Fortunately the Xolobeni communities are not alone in this struggle.

### **Simbhademe's funders and partners**

Simbhademe has been funded by Christian Aid and UNDP's Global Environmental Facility's Small Grants Programme (GEF/SGP). Its main partner has been Sustaining the Wild Coast (SWC), who had overall responsibility for implementing the Simbhademe programme with assistance from the Alliance of Rural Communities (ARC). Other partners include Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), Community Organisation Resource Centre (CORC), Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), Sustainable Community Investment Programme (SCIP), Conservation International (CI) and the Department of the Environment and Tourism (DEAT), which is viewing Simbhademe as a potential model for roll-out countrywide to empower rural communities in terms of National Environmental Management act (NEMA) Section 2(4).

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<sup>3</sup> Lihle Mbokazi, a wilderness trail guide, introduced me to this term for courageous, strong women.

## **The Simbhademe Evaluation Story**

The evaluation of Simbhademe provided an opportunity to investigate ways in which the programme contributed to the preferred story of the amaPondo as people who are empowered and able to determine their future development. Much of the success of Simbhademe stems from intangibles and things that are difficult to measure. The two most valuable things participants mentioned were being listened to by Sandy Heather and having their needs taken seriously to the point where entire planned workshops were shelved at the last minute and replaced by content that was a current priority for the communities. Many people pay more attention to listening in their communities as a result of this experience.

Simbhademe is not about working with isolated rural communities but about growing a core or reference group of thirty inspired and enthusiastic people from six communities with a strong sense they are part of a bigger family that helps and supports each other. Sandy is clearly considered part of this family, though she lives in Johannesburg. When one of The Team facilitators heard Sandy was struggling financially, she sent her airtime for her mobile phone. Imagine the headline: "Rural woman buys airtime for northern suburb colleague in Jo'burg". We do live in an interesting country!

In addition to creating their own name, the participants also created the Simbhademe song, indications of a sense of ownership of the programme that is about to be formed into an organisation by the participants who want to ensure Simbhademe continues. The words have a special meaning and highlight issues, like the chief who sold his community's land and bought himself a car. It also refers to the people marching to Pretoria to demonstrate in front of the Parliament Buildings to expose their corrupt leaders. Whenever the group sings the Simbhademe song, there is a heightened sense of their strength, energy, courage and unity that is palpable.

In terms of impacts on individuals, several people reported changes in their value systems as a result of their involvement with Simbhademe. It has also been very important for people to know their rights. Obtaining this knowledge was likened to being brought into the light and becoming visible. It enabled one man to challenge the police who often arrive at a village and take in a person for questioning without giving a reason.

When four strangers were found collecting medicinal plants in the Mtentu Gorge, the community confronted the trespassers and warned them it is illegal to gather protected plants and next time they will be prosecuted or worse! The community realises that *muti* collectors will soon clear Mtentu of many valuable plants, including rare endemics to the area, if the word spreads that one can harvest plants from the Gorge with impunity.

Stories are common of people standing up for their rights and things that matter to them. Simbhademe participants also showed increasing understanding and appreciation of the existence of different knowledge systems. Mention was made of researchers who come from universities to interview people from the region. They don't come to instill knowledge but to take it. Clearly knowledge held by local people is as valuable, if not

more so, than knowledge held by those who are deemed “educated”. People still value and want formal education but they do not want to lose their local knowledge.

A community leader shared with me that a few years ago he was very unhappy that the Wild Coast landscape was not filled with factories. For him this meant the amaPondo had been left behind in terms of the wealth and goods and services that factories were bringing to other parts of South Africa. However, through Simbhademe he has been exposed to several local eco-tourism ventures and now considers this previously perceived lack as extreme good fortune. It has made him aware that big developments, like the Wild Coast casino, actually diminish local people’s wealth by taking away land and other resources. Very little of the wealth generated from this type of development finds its way back to local rural communities.

People are not opposed to development but want manageable smaller scale enterprises that they can understand and oversee, if not initially manage for themselves. These developments are more viable and more lucrative and less disruptive in that they utilise local labour and management rather than importing people with specialist skills. Chances of increasing HIV/AIDS in the area is also minimised.

In assessing Simbhademe’s growth, since February 2008, when the group first came together, participants compared the group to a maize or mealie plant that had grown from seed to reach adulthood and even produce a small ear of corn that is currently at a vulnerable stage and needs to be nurtured and protected to prevent it from being damaged or destroyed. Although the participants are confident that Simbhademe is strong and robust, they are also not naïve about the environment in which the organisation is operating and care and caution is required. There is a lot of jealousy and envy and misperceptions about the extent of Simbhademe’s funding and resources. Ironically, because Simbhademe has achieved so much with its limited resources, the programme is perceived as being far wealthier than it is.

Factors that participants identified as contributing to Simbhademe’s success include involving participants in all aspects of the programme; designing a programme that suits and respects the participants and their needs; reflecting regularly on the programme’s progress, strengths and weaknesses; the understanding and flexibility shown by the funders; listening and responding to participants’ expressed needs; using local expertise and providing relevant role models; providing good value for money; turning “weaknesses” into strengths and opportunities; building links not fostering division; committing generously to Simbhademe; addressing gender and equity matters; and, empowering Simbhademe and the six participating communities.

## **Conclusion**

The Simbhademe evaluation lived up to its name – “We discover”. It provided unique access to these isolated amaPondo communities to hear stories that challenge conventional assumptions about “the rural poor” based on “objective research data”, revealed instead the matchless wealth of these people. Using a Narrative approach encouraged curiosity and respect for the different values of the Xolobeni communities, their ways of life and their ideas about development. It revealed numerous examples of how these six community and individuals express their personal and communal agency. It showed wise use of their energies in focussing attention and resources on developing eco-tourism initiatives and ensuring food security, their preferred storyline or counter-plot, rather than submitting to their poverty status or becoming immobilised by the threats of dune mining and the N2 toll road. It revealed the great sacrifices people are making in order to protect their land and retain their culture. It provided understanding and appreciation for Nonhle Mbuthuma’s question: “Why do outsiders tell us that we are poor if we live in a mud hut? This is what we choose to do. We have always done it and we choose to carry on doing it.”

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