

A SWAZI APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE SOCIO-AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE KOMATI DOWNSTREAM DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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*Swaziland Komati Project Enterprise
Lutsala Road, P.O. Box 13, Tshaneni, L304, Swaziland*

“With the help of this project and the training, I will develop into a better person. For my family, there will be great development in our style of living.”

Elliot Sithole

PDA Community Member

Project overview

The Komati Downstream Development Project (KDDP) embraces a philosophy of farming and growth through knowledge, training and empowerment. The KDDP begins with the development of sugarcane farms and evolves into the development of economically sustainable communities striving to be regional models of social, environmental and economic success.

The Government of Swaziland is engaged in this exciting effort to improve and sustain the economic prospects for rural communities in the Kingdom. The Project aims to increase the rural standard of living through skills transfer in the creation of sugarcane farms. The project deviates from traditional development models and instead provides resources and training to empower people to manage and evaluate their own progress.

The KDDP is located in the Komati River Basin in the northeastern region of the country. The Project Development Area (PDA) extends over 27 000 hectares and is home to 22 000 people. The area is predominantly Swazi Nation Land (SNL) and is in the lowveld, with characteristic low, erratic rainfall and a long dry season. Subsistence farming dominates, and soil erosion is widespread. The KDDP is a part of a tri-phase international development scheme that will allow for irrigation in the area, which should enable a significant 10-fold increase in the productivity of suitable land.

The Government has created the Swaziland Komati Project Enterprise (SKPE) to establish the KDDP in conjunction with smallholders, comprised of local Farmers' Associations. SKPE's role as facilitator of the project, rather than manager, enables the affected communities to control all aspects of their development. SKPE is composed of a multi-disciplinary team of advisors and trainers who ensure beneficial national development and community integrity in the PDA.

The KDDP's unique approach to rural development

SKPE, which was formed in 1999, has two primary aims: to create sustainable sugarcane farms, and to enable multi-faceted development of communities in the PDA. Both tasks rely on social facilitation (*prior* to and during development), training

and resource generation as the foundation for successful development, and SKPE is responsible for maintaining this progressive approach throughout the project.

The entire community in the PDA is offered training to understand and manage the biophysical, social and economic impacts that the development may have on their lives. Training courses initially focus on communication skills, leadership roles, the potential for sugarcane as a commercial enterprise, environmental awareness, business understanding and constitutional issues. However, both the specific content and direction of the courses are determined by the communities' needs.

The KDDP is an interactive and responsive project that relies on a continuous evaluation process. A unique characteristic of the KDDP is its relationship with sociologists who maintain a healthy and vigorous atmosphere for progress. Social teams work closely with training teams to ensure community satisfaction, effective communication and socially responsible methods throughout the developmental process. The needs of the communities are obtained by the Social Teams, who then interact with SKPE's Training and/or Specialist Groups. The Training Teams modify their courses to suit the specific needs of the communities, and the Specialist Groups conduct studies to address particular concerns. Communities raise more complex issues as they pursue increasingly skilled activities, which require the Social and Training Teams to adapt their programmes to address these increasingly detailed and varied interests.

Also ingrained in SKPE's ethos is a fundamental commitment to sound environmental management. While required by legislation, the commitment is based on SKPE's belief in the importance of the relationships between dynamic, robust economies, societies and a stable environment. SKPE has integrated a philosophy of proactive awareness in the developmental process to convert potential adverse impacts from the development into beneficial and sustainable opportunities for the communities.

History and context

The KDDP is a major part of a larger development scheme called the Komati Basin Development Project (KBDP). The KBDP was conceived in the early 1980's to provide irrigation water for development in both in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) and Swaziland. The KBDP has three distinct phases that include:

- 1) The security of water for international agricultural development,
- 2) The implementation of the KDDP

3) The expansion of Mhlume Sugar Mill in Swaziland to accommodate the increase in cane production from the KDDP.

The first phase of the KBDP was the construction of the Maguga Dam on the upper reaches of the Komati River in Swaziland. The construction costs for the Dam were shared between the Governments of South Africa and Swaziland on a 60/40 basis with water delivery currently scheduled for the second quarter of 2002. It is expected to provide some 83 million cubic metres of water annually for Swaziland. The second stage involves the establishment of the KDDP using water from the Maguga Dam. This phase began in mid-1999 and is expected to be complete in 2006. The third stage of the project focuses on the private sector expansion of the Mhlume Sugar Mill. This will eventually enable an additional (\pm) 80 000 tons of sugar to be processed annually from the smallholder farms.

Sugarcane as a vehicle for human development

The development of sugarcane farms will result in an opportunity for growth and progress in the PDA. Sugarcane has been selected as the ideal crop for community development for a number of reasons:

- Sugarcane production is straightforward, and the crop is less susceptible to disease than other cash crops.
- Smallholder cane farmers have well-defined responsibilities limited to growth, harvest and transport of the crop. Processing and marketing are conducted by others.
- Profit is accrued within one year of planting.
- Income is generated within one week of delivery to the Mill.
- The Mhlume Mill is within an economic haulage distance from the PDA.
- Irrigated sugarcane is a fairly common crop in Swaziland and effectively utilizes water from the Maguga Dam.
- Sugarcane is well suited to the climate and soils of the PDA.

- KDDP pilot studies indicate profitable yields from sugarcane production in the area.
- Smallholder farmers readily agree to stop orders on their income at the Mill, which guarantees that banks and suppliers will receive their money.
- SKPE estimates that the KDDP's Economic Internal Rates of Return will be between 15 and 25% for the smallholder farmers.

Additional physical improvements that result from the establishment of sugar farms, such as the creation of a rural electrification supply, civil works and an eventual potable water scheme, have far-reaching effects on community development. Improved training and management skills percolate through the PDA creating opportunities for the pursuit of diverse businesses. The infrastructural developments and intensive training programmes increase the potential for the communities in the PDA to feel empowered and better able to guide their lifestyles in a direction they see fit.

Rural prospects

There are many factors that will determine the success of the project. Are the sugarcane farms producing globally competitive sucrose yields? Are community members accountable for their developmental choices and decisions? Have loans been repaid, and are people receiving economic benefits? Are the farms environmentally and socially sustainable? Has the greater community in the PDA benefited from these developments? Has the development of sugarcane farms triggered the creation of other viable businesses in the community? Is the rural standard of living increasing?

As the KDDP is still in its inaugural stages, these questions remain to be answered. With their commitment to the project's approach and objectives, SKPE and the affected Swaziland community will be working together towards alleviating rural poverty and achieving these ambitious and achievable goals.