

iLembe Schools Nutrition Pilot Programme A Success

A PILOT project to feed rural school children in iLembe District, north of Durban has been so successful that it is going to be extended to the rest of the province next January.

“It is going extremely well and is going to change rural poverty,” predicted Mike Newton, the Head of Economic Development at Enterprise iLembe, the Economic Development Agency of iLembe District Municipality. The flagship project, which began in January, has already provided fresh, high-quality lunches to more than 155 000 children in some 400 rural primary, secondary and special schools in the region.

The children live in some of the poorest communities in the province, and that welcome meal, comprising a range of fresh vegetables, enables them to concentrate on their studies.

The Schools Nutrition Programme is a poverty alleviation project and as well as feeding children, it is also providing a much-needed income for the 500-plus farmers and their helpers-more than 1 000 in total-who are already growing the vegetables. That number will increase as further farmers are identified.

Hundreds of tons of vegetables-butternut, cabbage, spinach, green beans, tomatoes and onions-have already been grown for schools by the farmers in co-operatives in the four main areas of the region: Ndwedwe, Maphumulo, Mandeni and KwaDukuza.

“It is working like a charm and there are certain co-operatives that have already got more than R50 000 in their bank accounts,” said Cllr. S.W. Mdabe, Mayor of iLembe District Municipality. This project is achieving its aim of turning subsistence farmers into commercial farmers, he said. As a result, the project received recognition at the Municipality Excellence Awards in 2013 in addition to scooping the *Best Community Project Award* for the iLembe Vineyards & Co-operative Winery.

The project is being run by the local economic development agency, Enterprise iLembe, a district municipal entity. It was selected by the provincial Department of Education as it has the most advanced development agency in the province.

Enterprise iLembe called in the experts from Sigma International, a Durban-based management consultancy, which specialises in implementation to assist with the roll-out of the project.

Newton said that after he addressed the KZN cabinet on the progress of the scheme, it was decided to roll it out in the other 10 district municipalities throughout the province, starting in January.

That will extend the programme to some two million school children in more than 5 000 schools.

Several provincial government departments are involved in the project, ranging from the Department of Agriculture, which provided the original vegetable seeds, to the Department of Economic Development and Tourism as well as the Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs.

Mr. Zakhele Gumede, the Acting Chief Executive of Enterprise iLembe, is thrilled at the way the project has unfolded and is delighted that every district in the province will also be able to benefit from next year.

“It was really started from virgin territory and is enriching the lives of so many people,” he said.

“There are a lot of new farmers involved and a lot of younger people coming in too. It is quite satisfying.”

Some of the seeds are grown in Dube Tradeport’s Agrizone and then the plants are grown on land cultivated by the farming co-operatives.

The vegetables are then transported by Enterprise iLembe to agricultural hubs-cold storage facilities-where 22 people have already got temporary jobs. The vegetables are packed into the correct amounts for each school and are collected by service providers who distribute them to the schools. The meals are prepared by dedicated food handlers.

Enterprise iLembe has also trained the farmers in such skills as preparing invoices, as well as the procedures in what to do to become suppliers for the school’s nutrition programme.

A spin-off is that the farmers’ excess vegetables are now being sold to other customers, and the Gooderson Hotel Group is one of the commercial customers to sign up for the locally-grown vegetables.

“We did not expect to break into the hospitality trade so quickly,” said Newton.

“Right now, the demand is bigger than our supply and that is a nice place to be,” he added.

However, other customers are still being sought-and the long-term aim is to supply hospitals, clinics and prisons, Newton explained.

***For more information** with regards to the Schools Nutrition Programme and other Economic Development Programmes coordinated by Enterprise iLembe within the iLembe District Municipality, please contact us on our details below:*

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