

# Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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## **Animals change the lives of the poor and impoverished**

Forty-five year old Nothintwa Mkhize's husband died when her eldest son was in Grade 7. "After his father died my son decided to leave school to look for work and become the breadwinner for his mother and six brothers and sisters since the family had no means of income. My father-in-law assisted me to feed the children by sharing his small pension which was his only source of income."

Her neighbours subsequently employed Mkhize, who lives in the peri-urban Valley of a Thousand Hills, west of Durban, as a babysitter and to work in their fields. The money that she earned was enough to pay for her children's school fees.

But then the Mkhize family became victims of violence between members of opposition political parties that had ravaged KwaZulu-Natal. "In 1996 political violence erupted in our area and our mud hut, the furniture we had accumulated over the years and all our clothes were burnt. The children could no longer go to school because they did not have uniforms. They stayed home for the whole year, while I saved each day until at the end of the year I was able to buy them uniforms. If we had mealie meal (corn meal) then we felt that we had everything. We would cook the mealie meal to make a soft porridge and allow it to ferment so that we could drink it. On other days we would cook swiss chard, which we picked from the garden, and eat it with cooked mealie meal called uphuthu ugali in Zulu."

The Heifer Project spurred a change in the life of Mkhize and her family. As part of the project she was given a cow and egg laying chickens. "The arrival of the cow has made a big difference in our lives. We are now getting milk, which we sometimes drink fresh or allow it to ferment into sour milk. We now get cow dung that we use to polish the floors of our hut and also use as fertiliser in the field. Before it was very difficult for us to get cow dung from our neighbours because people did not want to give away the dung. The 12 hens are currently producing 12 eggs per day, six of which we sell to neighbours and six we consume. My children have gained weight. It is difficult for me to express my heartfelt joy. God has answered my prayers."

Dan West started the Heifer Project in 1944. A conscientious objector in the Spanish civil war, he was given the task of handing out powdered milk. West found that this created a dependency and after the war he initiated a project in which a cow could be given to needy people to enable them to be in control of their own lives.

**Heifer Project-South Africa's director of support services, Dr Gavin MacGregor says that**

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the project uses whatever type of animal is appropriate to assist the lives of people in the 48 countries in which the Heifer Project works. In Latin America, for example, llamas provide a source of wool for warm clothes, manure to fertilise crops and are pack animals that can carry loads to market.

The South African office of the project has been operating full-time, with headquarters in Assagay outside Durban, since September 1999. MacGregor stresses the importance of the organisation in South Africa where unemployment rates have steadily increased in the past six years. The level of unemployment in some rural areas is estimated to be as high as 80%, although the official statistics reveal that about 55% of economically active people are unemployed.

MacGregor says that poverty is not the only difficulty that thousands of South Africans face daily. "Maybe an even bigger problem is a lack of self esteem caused during the 40 years of apartheid, which has led to a dependency among the poor and impoverished. The challenge that Heifer Project-South Africa faces is thus not only to assist people to produce food and income for themselves, but also to help them to start believing in themselves whereby they can break out of the chains of dependency which have held them captive for so many years."

An important aspect of the project, according to MacGregor, is that things should not be given away, but the work of the organisation also has to take into account the inability of families to buy an animal. With this in mind, the Heifer Project gives an animal to a family on condition that the family passes on the first female offspring to another family. "In this way they pass on the same value of what they were given and they pay the price of the animal." Called "passing on the gift", MacGregor says that this is one of the successes of the Heifer Project which builds accountability. "The person getting the first calf will take an interest in how the cow is looked after. That takes away the need to be a policeman and to check up on everything that is being done."

Although some communities may regard cows as the most beneficial, MacGregor warns that each cow has a stomach the size of a 44-gallon drum that needs to be filled every day. As a result the Heifer Project works mainly with poultry in South Africa. The chickens usually lay about 10 eggs a day of which a family can sell about four. They also generate manure that can be used in vegetable gardens and for crops. The chickens are kept in a cage and new owners are taught how to feed them properly.

The Heifer Project staff assist individuals to choose the type of animal that would most make a difference in their lives and teach animal husbandry as well as skills such as planting feed and building shelter for the animals. Although individuals are the owners of the animals, the project works with groups and assists in developing leadership in the group, opening bank accounts and learning basic financial bookkeeping skills. When chickens are kept for their eggs, communities have to pay for the birds and the equipment provided by the Heifer Project instead of passing on the offspring. The project's officials provide support for five years to ensure that the community project becomes sustainable. MacGregor says that, in his experience, about 95% of the families pay all the money back within the required period of time. "People who are poor don't want to be poor, but they don't want handouts."

A second and smaller part of the Heifer Project's work is concerned with public education. MacGregor says that he gives talks to service organisation and other groups

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on issues of poverty and highlights how people can become involved in addressing these issues. Ninety percent of the Heifer Project's funds come from individuals and school children are encouraged to be part of the Project's Read to Feed programme. At one KwaZulu-Natal school children got sponsors and then read sufficient books to buy four dairy goats, four pregnant pigs and 24 laying hens. These benefited eight families and an Aids orphanage. MacGregor says that the highlight was handing over the hens to the orphanage, which is home to about 50 children whose parents have died from Aids.

Messages of gratitude from communities that have benefited from the Heifer Project are common. A goat provided to a family in Uganda 10 years ago enabled a young girl to go to school. A group of women from an Aids prevention association in Zimbabwe received chickens from the Project. The chairperson wrote: "I no longer see myself as a social misfit. I have acquired leadership skills and I enjoy working with other women. As a single mother I am now able to fend for my children and myself. All members are single mothers except for one man. The support from Heifer Project has also reduced commercial sex work among members and thus reduced HIV/Aids. The women now devote most of their time working at the farm and are becoming more economically empowered and assertive. You have not put your money down the drain; it is helping a lot of disadvantaged women."

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