

BASIC CASE INFO



Inspiring Initiative: Partnership for Sustainable Agriculture

Land: South Africa

Land degradation: Soil degradation by poor land use practices and overcrowding

Initiative by: University of Kwazulu-Natal, Farmer Support Group / **Initiative supported by:** EMG

Working the Fields for Healthy Soils



PARTICIPATORY LEARNING

The approach was highly participatory, unlike the rather top-down and prescriptive approach that has previously dominated extension work in the region. Most sessions took place in the farmers' own fields, with an emphasis on practical learning - (e.g. building compost heaps, run-on ditches, trench beds, or on the use of mulches and cover crops). Several visits were also organised to see and evaluate innovations (e.g. approaches to vegetable gardening and water harvesting techniques) implemented by farmers elsewhere. Participatory monitoring and evaluation by the farmers themselves was also a key aspect of the learning process. Photography was used as a central element in building and sharing knowledge.



SETTING THE INITIATIVE

Potshini lies at the foothills of the Drakenburg Mountains, close to the border with Lesotho. Subsistence agriculture is widely practised - although most people rely more on external sources of income, such as social grants or remittances for their livelihoods. Crops are grown in the summer - when the cattle range on communal lands - and in winter the cattle graze the crop residues in the fields. Decades of overcrowding (the legacy of apartheid) and poor land-use practices are taking their toll on the landscape, which is suffering from erosion, soil loss and nutrient depletion.

The Smallholder Systems Innovations Project was established by two departments at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: the Farmer Support Group (FSG, the community development and outreach division of the Centre for the Environment, Agriculture and Development) and the School of Bioresources Engineering and Environmental Hydrology. The FSG had worked in the area before and had good links with the local community. They built on two existing farmers' groups to establish two Farmer Learner Groups, each with about thirty participating members. These groups shared and experimented with new technologies in farming, using Farmer Life Schools, an innovative way of working with groups, that uses participatory action research, and cross visits. The main aim of these schools was to involve farmers in seeking and adopting appropriate soil and water management innovations, drawing on their own experience and knowledge. Discussions between farmers and facilitators led to the development of a curriculum covering subjects such as soil and water management, seedling production, tree planting, food processing, nutrition, marketing and the challenges of HIV/AIDS.

MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

The project was well accepted in the community, primarily because it was designed and carried out in a participative fashion and was shaped by the farmers' needs and priorities. Interactions between stakeholders were not institutionalized but remained informal and led to improved knowledge about soil and water management and other aspects of agriculture and rural livelihoods. Participants said that the programme improved their knowledge about water conservation, making gardens, seeds, soil fertility, pest control and organic farming.

The project contributed significantly to a decrease in water run-off and soil erosion and an increase in tree planting. Better management also saw participants increase their maize yields (by an average of 168%), household food security and incomes (through marketing vegetables). People were clearly better able to meet household expenses - with many able to improve or repair their homes or other buildings in their compound or being able to send their children to school. The process also strengthened communications between members of the groups and with neighbours and family members who had not been able to participate.