

Sappi invests in community growth through Abashintshi youth project

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With the initial goal of improving stakeholder relations in the communities surrounding their operations in KZN, [Sappi Southern Africa](#) sought community-minded individuals and recruited them for the Abashintshi Social Mobilisation Project, but the results of the programme have exceeded expectations and continue to make an even greater impact than ever expected.

Sappi launched the [Abashintshi Social Mobilisation Project](#) in 2015, with the goal to train and develop the skills of youth within the communities surrounding their plantations in southern KwaZulu-Natal, providing an opportunity for them to become actively involved in making meaningful change regarding issues within their communities. These individuals are known as the Abashintshi, meaning 'the changers' in isiZulu.

Empowering the community

In 2014 Sappi contracted community development experts DevCom, who began with research involving 600 people in nine communities in southern KZN, to determine the factors involved in community mind-sets. Findings were that over 90% of the communities were unemployed, especially among residents aged between 18-25 years-old. Most people with jobs in the area were either employed by Sappi or were Sappi contractors.

The conclusion was that the unemployed were predominantly the youth within the communities who were ill-equipped to deal with the challenges they are faced or with the skills to lift themselves up out of these conditions. Those who were employed by Sappi or their contractors were also disillusioned by poverty and poor living conditions and circumstances, often directing their frustrations at Sappi and at society in general.



Sappi wanted a lasting intervention, and the Abashintshi programme was conceptualised. Essentially, this training programme calls on these youths to raise awareness around community assets and to utilise these better. The success of the programme has its foundation in ABCD (Asset Based Community Development) methodology, which maps the assets in each community to gain an understanding and appreciation of the assets that exist in these communities. These relate to natural, social, institutional, physical and individual assets. Using an ABCD approach teaches individuals to use what they already have, and to grow those assets to the benefit of the individuals, but also to the betterment of the community at large, rather than focussing on what they don't have and letting it stifle their progress in life.

Empowering the individual

DevCom initially recruited 18 unemployed youngsters and together they drew literal maps of their areas, logging the resources, from pumpkin patches to crèches run by grandmothers. Then they got discussions going about how to utilise these resources and to ensure that as much of the money in the community, stayed there, from earnings to social grant money. Fast-forward two years and 88 unemployed youngsters across approx. 30 communities have become agents of social change.

The Abashintshi programme teaches youngsters valuable life skills as part of its curriculum, equipping them with information

to enable them to make responsible life choices and instilling an appreciation for their own worth.

Empowering the elders

The Ifa Lethu aspect of the programme focusses on getting the youth to engage with the elders in the communities to get a better understanding of and appreciation for their heritage and culture. This has been seen as a most welcome element of the programme as it has ensured that the elders in the communities are similarly engaged and enthusiastic about the opportunities that are available, and do not feel isolated and overlooked. In addition, the ABCD way of thinking has given the communities a reason to engage with the traditional leaders on projects that need their permission, with Abashintshi working with the elders to implement strategies and changes within the communities. Overall, the approach allows for inclusion and community cohesion, as it respects social norms and structures, while simultaneously breaking ground with renewed thinking.

Empowering business

Besides the work these youngsters have done to enthuse the members of their communities, and bringing about social change and mobilisation, their own individual growth has meant that most of the Abashintshi have gone on to start their own businesses since they joined the programme.

The startUP&go business training facet of the programme offers useful entrepreneurship and leadership training, incorporating all the elements needed to manage a successful business. Some of the individuals are now operating promising micro businesses like selling second-hand clothing, running tuck shops or spazas, baking goods for sale to schools, or even operating a vibrant Non-Profit Organisation in one of the areas.

Throughout their training programmes, the individuals are encouraged to create school holiday programmes for learners, with the idea of passing on the baton to new, enthused youths who will hopefully emerge as leaders in their communities going forward, while keeping them occupied in healthy activities.

Continued growth

Since it launched in 2015 the project has grown and extended from KZN, which was the pilot project, into the North into Zululand and Mpumalanga.

Sappi's Terry Stanger said his staff reported improved relations because of Abashintshi, "We are ever-optimistic that through education and awareness the people in our communities will grow in the appreciation of their assets and prosper as a result of this initiative. Through development and engagement, communities will realise economic upliftment and the value of communication. We see the future as one where neighbours work together and support each other for the benefit of all."

To find out how you can get involved, or for more information, contact: zelda.schwalbach@sappi.com

**Over the past two years, Sappi has already won four awards for the Abashintshi Social Mobilisation programme, namely two International IABC (International Association of Business Communicators) Golden Quills, one IABC African Gold Quill and one Gold PRISM award. These awards demonstrate that thoughtful innovation and the willingness to make a positive impact in communities is recognised by the professional communication industry internationally, as being excellent business practice.*

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