



Harvesting community timber at Mabandla, southern KwaZulu-Natal.



Community members tending a young plantation near Matatiele, Eastern Cape.

IDC prioritises Eastern Cape forestry projects

The Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) is assisting rural communities in the Eastern Cape to get greenfields forestry projects up and running, and are targeting 25 000ha that they can support.

This is a significant contribution towards government's target of establishing 100 000ha of new forestry plantations in the Eastern Cape, a region where local job opportunities are few and far between.

Forestry projects have the potential to be a catalyst for rural development by creating viable, sustainable businesses for rural communities and then providing a platform for further business development.

One of the key challenges faced by rural communities in the region who have expressed an interest in planting commercial trees on their land is that they lack the capacity and resources to get their projects off the ground. The IDC has created a fund specifically to assist communities with the project preparation phase, taking them up to 'bankability' with the necessary planting permits and viable land

use and business plans in place. At this point, the communities involved will be in a position to access loan funding to implement their projects.

According to Chris Nicholson and Steven Ngubane who are based at IDC's Pietermaritzburg offices, the initial work involves compiling detailed maps of a community's land, showing land use, mean annual rainfall and temperature, soil depths and areas of high conservation value where water use licences are unlikely to be approved. The aim of this exercise is to identify land that is suitable for forestry, such as abandoned arable land and land that has been taken over by wattle jungle.

"We don't want to promote forestry in areas where it is unsuitable," said Chris.

This screening work has enabled the IDC team to concentrate their efforts on projects where communities have access to sufficient land that is suitable for afforestation, and they are currently prioritising 24 projects. In all of these projects, the communi-

ties have access to in excess of 200ha of potential forestry land as this is considered to be the minimum requirement for a viable forestry enterprise.

A grant of R1 million per project has been allocated by the IDC to get the projects up to bankability stage. There is a lot of work to be done during this phase, including detailed soil surveys, EIAs, water use licence applications and preparation of land use and business plans.

The communities are also assisted to set up structures that can articulate their needs effectively and steer the project through its many phases. This work is often slow and difficult, with complex community dynamics playing a role.

All of this work requires collaboration with key stakeholders, including the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department of Water Affairs, as well as strategic forestry partners.

Chris says that project preparation is Phase one, which takes the project up to the point of bankability. Phase two is where the project is implemented. This involves mobilising the resources required to set up the business entity, planting the trees and running the forestry business, preferably with assistance and mentoring from a strategic partner.

Phase three is when the forestry project is running smoothly and there is sufficient resources and confidence to embark on further projects to develop and expand the community's business interests.

A good example of a community forestry project that has progressed to Phase three and is now providing a platform for further sustainable development, is the Umgano Project in southern KwaZulu-Natal. The Mabandla community planted their first trees way back in 1996, eventually establishing 880ha of eucalyptus and 440ha of pine. Today, they have a sustainable R10 million-a-year business, and the community is now launching several new business ventures, including a sawmilling project, eco-tourism and a cattle project. 🌱



Encouraging signs of development ... the timber plantation on the hills above the Mabandla rural village (visible in the background) is the catalyst for development.