

# The Heiveld Cooperative - South Africa

## A vehicle for sustainable local development

*Ecosystem:* semi-arid

### Summary

Category: sustainable agriculture -

In the semi-arid west of South Africa, an area of enormous biological diversity, previously disenfranchised small scale farmers have pooled their resources and long-held indigenous knowledge, establishing a successful farmers' cooperative that exports fair trade and organic certified rooibos tea to niche markets in Europe, North America and Australasia. Found only in the unique ecosystems of the Western and Northern Cape, rooibos is cultivated or collected in the wild to supply the entire world's demand for this sought-after health-giving drink.

Against a backdrop of a long history of social and political oppression under colonial and Apartheid rule, the members of the Heiveld Cooperative have developed their skills in collective organisation with the support of two NGOs working in the area. In the spirit of true partnership and mutual learning, the Heiveld has grown from 14 to 54 members in 8 years, and has increased sustainable production from 30 to 50 tonnes per year. The members of the co-op have developed their problemsolving capacities to deal with the various social, economic and environmental

### Background Story

As with many other post-colonial societies, the descendents of the KhoiSan "first people" of South Africa have experienced systematic and profound disempowerment by colonial settlers and their descendents. What is perhaps more unique is the length of time that they have been subjected to domination, the extent to which their culture has been obliterated and the unique tools of domination applied to ensure that the dominant classes could exploit their labour at little cost. In the rural areas of the Western and Northern Cape Provinces of South Africa the modern descendents of the KhoiSan speak a language derived from Dutch, and remain on the economic fringes of society. Apartheid was officially abolished in 1994, but its legacy lives on in the inequitable social and economic relations in these communities where more than 90% of agricultural land belongs to white land owners, and so-called "Coloured" farmers are confined to the most marginal areas.

One of the many legacies of the KhoiSan is their knowledge of rooibos (*Aspalatus Linearis*), an indigenous plant used since pre-historic times to produce a health giving and refreshing beverage. This knowledge was shared with white settlers, who in the 20th Century were able to benefit from the commercial opportunities offered by the growth of an export-oriented industry. The labour to establish the huge plantations of rooibos upon which the industry is based was provided by "Coloured" people, who were prevented from participating in the other benefits of the industry by racially discriminating policies, legislation and other means of exclusion. Those few "Coloureds" who had access to land on which rooibos could be produced (usually only on a small scale) were excluded from markets and state support.

The rooibos plant (*Aspalatus Linearis*) is native to the harsh environment of the mountainous winter rainfall areas of the west of South Africa, and has

evolved a number of unique adaptations to thrive in its drought-prone, low nutrient habitat. This is a fire-driven eco-system dominated by “fynbos” species that are adapted to summer drought. The leaves and young shoots of rooibos (Figure 1) have been used by indigenous peoples of South Africa since prehistory to produce a health-giving beverage known as rooibos tea (Figure 2).

Originally collected in the wild, it was only from the early 1900s that the species was cultivated on a commercial basis. This cultivation destroyed the endemic plant communities in which wild rooibos grew.

Rooibos is endemic to the arid regions of the Western and Northern Cape of South Africa, and grows nowhere else in the world. Because of its unique soil and climatic requirement and its associations with other biotic components of the ecosystem (bacteria, fungi, pollinators, etc.) rooibos has not been successfully cultivated in other parts of the world, and all demand is supplied from a single production area that is approximately 200 x 100 kilometres in extent (Figure 3).

Once considered a poor man’s drink, in recent years rooibos tea has become a highly valued and much sought-after tea in the health-conscious European and North American markets. Exports in 2008 were 6,886 tons, of which 840 tons was organic rooibos. In the same year the domestic consumption of rooibos was in the region of 3,200 tons. The growth of market demand has placed evergreater pressure on the remaining areas where wild rooibos grows.

Due to its aridity, low fertility and inhospitable nature, the region where rooibos naturally occurs is sparsely populated (Figure 4). It is primarily inhabited by dispossessed “Coloured” people. Most work as labourers for “white” landowners who claim descent from European settlers, and who were the beneficiaries of policies and laws promulgated by the colonial and Apartheid governments. However, on the north-eastern fringes of the production area some “Coloured” land owners and users have succeeded in retaining or regaining access to land. Widespread cultivation is not possible in these rocky areas, but wild rooibos populations flourish here. Using their traditional knowledge, these small-scale farmers produce rooibos tea (both wild and cultivated) and subsistence crops and practice pastoralism with small livestock. Two communities of small-scale farmers in particular have been harvesting wild and cultivated rooibos for decades.

The northern-most community, comprising about 1 000 people lives scattered across the Suid Bokkeveld, a remote rural area situated in the Northern Cape Province that covers an area of approximately 1,600 km<sup>2</sup>. This area lies within the transition zone of the Fynbos and Succulent Karroo biomes. Coarse-grained, nutrient poor soils support Fynbos plant species, and fine grained Karroo shales sustain drought resilient plants of the Succulent Karroo vegetation type. High species richness and endemism have earned the Bokkeveld Plateau recognition as a global biodiversity hotspot with high levels of endemism of geophytes in particular (Manning and Goldblatt 1997). The Suid Bokkeveld lies within the semi-arid winter rainfall region (receiving between 150 and 300 mm per annum), and periodic droughts impact severely, particularly on the lower rainfall areas. Direct impacts of prolonged drought conditions from 2003 to 2006 resulted in dramatic declines in agricultural production, mortality of crops and livestock and the drying up of most water sources.

The small-scale farmers of the region generally work for between one and six months tending their own crops and livestock on land that they own, lease or have customary use of. The rest of their working time is spent as seasonal labourers on neighbouring farms or further afield. The area has limited arable land and small-scale farmers have very few alternatives to low-input subsistence and crop farming.

In the late 1990s, the farmers began to organize in an attempt to combat the extreme poverty they were facing. The community had remarkably limited experience of collective organisation, no doubt due both to physical isolation and the long history of social and political oppression that actively discouraged collective action. The community lives scattered throughout the rocky terrain, without the benefit of a community centre. Members of the community requested assistance from a Cape Town based NGO, the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG). EMG held an initial meeting with community representatives in the course of which a number of principles were agreed to, which subsequently served as the basis for all further actions:

Involvement in any project activity should include contribution and benefit;

People's vision, enthusiasm and contribution should be mobilised before;

The least advantaged should benefit the most;

The project should benefit the local community, and the wider community;

Everybody undertakes to work together in the spirit of mutual respect;

There should be transparency regarding all project documentation.  
water.

On the basis of the initial meeting EMG convened a two day community workshop in 1999 to enable the members of the community to share their common histories, develop a vision for development, analyse their constraints and develop common objectives. Participatory Learning and Action methods were applied, and a vision was generated on the basis of drawings done by the members of homogeneous sub-groups. It was clear that rooibos was a resource that community members understood profoundly and could produce with excellence, but for which they received little benefit as a result of being excluded from direct participation in markets. In subsequent meetings rooibos producers in the community expressed interest in becoming more engaged in collective marketing, but felt that they lacked the knowledge and related confidence to take any action.

With a mandate from the community EMG raised funds for a knowledge exchange visit to the small-scale rooibos producer community of Wupperthal and to an organic exporter of rooibos tea. This 2 day visit had a profound effect on the participants, who decided to form an organisation for collective processing and marketing of their rooibos product.

With EMG's help the fourteen founder members organised themselves into a business in 2001, and registered the Heiveld Co-operative Limited as a processing and trading organisation. The Heiveld provides cultivated and wild harvested rooibos tea for niche fairtrade and organic markets in Europe, North America, Australasia and South Africa. In keeping with international standards, the Heiveld has established internal mechanisms to ensure organic production of cultivated rooibos tea, sustainable harvesting of wild growing rooibos and the adoption of farming practices that ensure conservation of biodiversity, soil and water.

## **Strategies**

From the first, EMG proposed a partnership approach with members of the local community. The initiative was launched without external funding, and developed on the basis of people's own vision, commitment and contribution.

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach was taken by the EMG, which sought to enhance people's ability to learn together in the course of taking action to improve their situation. PAR is underpinned by the belief that changes for the better must be driven by those whose lives are to be improved, and not by "outsiders". Positive change takes place as a

result of conscious effort, and in a cyclical manner involving collective reflection, decision making, planning and action.

The Heiveld Co-operative is governed by a democratically elected Board of 5 Directors, all of whom are small-scale rooibos producers. Membership increased from 14 to 54 between 2001 and 2009. The Heiveld produces an average of 50 tons of rooibos per annum and exports bulk and locally packaged tea to traders in 15 countries (Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America).

Since its formation, members of the Heiveld Co-operative have collaborated with MG, Indigo development & change, the University of Cape Town and other research and development organisations to address perceived production constraints and social needs, and have been integral partners in research and interventions in the Suid Bokkeveld, contributing valuable local knowledge that had, until this point, been largely undocumented. These include research on sustainable harvesting of wild rooibos (2003-2006), workshops and research participation in a WWF-funded climate change study (2004-2006) and farmer-driven activities to conserve soil and water, funded by the GEF Small Grants programme (2005-2007).

The development of entrepreneurial and business management skills has been an on-going activity of the Heiveld. The rotation of Directors means that incoming candidates need to acquire new skill sets, and formal training and mentorship have been applied on a regular basis.

Accurate spatial information is increasingly required by organic certifying agencies for the purpose of audit verification, and the Heiveld enlisted the support of Indigo to develop a comprehensive Geographic Information System (GIS) for the production areas of its members. Understanding spatial aspects of and also emerged as important in securing land rights. Participatory GIS was developed and members acquired skills in generating maps and in using the subsequent products.

Sustainable land use was recognised from an early stage as being important for sustainable production. In collaboration with EMG the Heiveld developed and applied strategies for preventing soil erosion and enhancing resilience in the production system. This is reflected in the organisation's Organic Management Plan, and is supported by the services of two Mentor Farmers, whose task it is to educate their fellow farmers in sustainable production techniques.

Experienced climate variability has had major economic impacts on the members of the Heiveld, particularly in the course of the drought of 2003 – 2006, during which some members lost all of their rooibos tea plants. This led to the enthusiastic participation of members in a series of quarterly climate change workshops convened by EMG in collaboration with the University of Cape Town and Indigo. The workshop participants share their experiences of the weather in the previous three months, reflect on its impacts on their farming enterprises, review predicted weather for the coming quarter and devise plans to respond to it. This process led the Heiveld to raise funds from the GEF Small Grants Programme to enable its members to undertake initiatives to address land degradation and to adapt to expected climatic change, as well as installing solar power at the Heiveld tea court. Small projects undertaken with GEF funding have included erection of wind barriers in rooibos lands, removal of invasive alien tree species and control of soil erosion from roads and fields.

In addition to the provision of solar power at its tea court the Heiveld has also implemented other measures to enhance environmental sustainability. Rain water is collected from roofs and stored for use in the tea making process, as

well as being harvested to water shelter belts of indigenous trees on the windward side of the tea court.

## **Stakeholders**

The main stakeholders in the Heiveld are small-scale rooibos farmers in the Suid Bokkeveld area of Hantam Districts of the Northern Cape.

Beneficiaries of the success for the process include the families, dependents and other community members in the area.

## **Success**

One of the key achievements of the Heiveld Co-operative has been the establishment of a profitable business with stable trading relationships. More specifically, the successes can be outlined as follows:

**Achievements of the business:**

- Growth of markets on 4 continents;
- Sound trading relations with a range of fair trade and conventional wholesale and retail traders;
- Organic and Fairtrade certification;
- Increased production from 30 tons in 2001 to 71 tons in 2008;
- Fair trade wages for farm workers and good working conditions;
- Own office facilities, a number of assets, own tea court;
- Job creation in an economically marginalised area (2 permanent office staff, 11 seasonal workers, 1 women's group for production of local packaging).

**Achievements for the community:**

- Investments of 30% of its surplus in community projects that benefit the larger community;
- Sponsored community projects, provided an educational scholarship and provided funds to the local school and church;
- Conservation of traditional knowledge about rooibos production;
- Local knowledge sharing through initial and follow-up exchange visits to successful community-based initiatives like the Wupperthal Tea Association;
- Capacity development through exchange visits and workshops;
- Inspiration to pool human and economic resources to produce organic rooibos tea collectively;
- Self-confidence and self-belief through own management of production, export and local packaging;
- Raised quality of life for the farmers (more and more people are benefitting from their participation in the cooperative);
- Sense of solidarity and commitment in the local community.

#### Achievements for environmental sustainability:

- Organic and sustainable production and harvesting of rooibos tea;
- Developed strategies against soil erosion and land degradation (e.g. testing the use of windbreaks);
- Conservation of wild rooibos (and associated biodiversity);
- Build a linkage between alternative forms of production at the local level and a global movement for fair trade practices;
- Raising awareness about environmentally sustainable farming, the importance of organic farming and organic seedling development.

#### Achievements in terms of partnerships:

- Build a strong relationship with the two local NGOs (EMG and Indigo development & change);
- Establish linkages with academic research institutions like the University of Cape Town (research on soil conditions, environmental impacts, rooibos farming methods) to face climate change and develop possible adaptation strategies.

Heiveld member and Director Ragel Hesselman articulated what has been fundamental to the achievements of the Heiveld when asked 'What has been the effect of the fair trade for you and your life?':

*"Fair trade is about self respect and human dignity. The Apartheid times gave my self-confidence a huge set-back. I now have confidence in myself, I know that I can rely on myself without fear or shame. Fair trade has helped to give me a place in the sun as a woman who can express her own views and take positions. In the past we, as women, never had the privilege to express ourselves, but now we are able to stand our ground. We no longer need to stand back for the men, and can take up our places in the business world."*

#### **Threats and Challenges**

Relative lack of experience in business management amongst Heiveld members and elected leadership has remained problematic for the Heiveld. This is a legacy of the colonial and Apartheid eras, in which Coloured people were regarded by those in power as a source of labour. Young people received little schooling, and this is reflected in the low levels of formal education amongst the older membership. More than three centuries of oppression entirely re-shaped the language, culture, religion and social relations of the local community, and some aspects of this legacy remain challenging: relative lack of experience in managing democratically run institutions and their staff, and a willingness to overlook shortcomings of fellow-members of the community create management challenges. Alcohol abuse stemming from the past system of paying workers in wine remains a challenge.

Organic and fair trade certification demand compliance with an ever-increasing and ever more stringent set of standards, requiring the development and maintenance of complex records and on-going education of members. The levels of sophistication demanded of semi-literate members requires increased levels of management from the staff of the organisation, and ever-higher costs. These demands favour the large scale producers in the organic and fair trade markets, as they run streamlined operations that have the financial and managerial capacities to more easily cope with these complex demands.

In 2006 the Heiveld raised loan capital to invest in a value-adding packaging venture in Cape Town. Its fellow-investors were another small farmer rooibos producer organisation (Wupperthal Rooibos), and the Cape Town based entrepreneur who initiated the venture and became its Managing Director. For 3 years the business failed to operate in an accountable and transparent manner, and did not pay its debts to the Heiveld, severely impacting on the cash flows of the business. Poor management resulted in late and incorrect deliveries to clients, who in turn were penalised by the retailers that they were supplying. Orders were reduced and reputational damage was done. Corrupt practices within the business favoured Wupperthal, which understandably backed the MD. Legal interventions were only partly successful in forcing the MD to fulfil his obligations to his fellow-investors. The Heiveld eventually withdrew from the company. This experience emphasised the importance of being in control of the value chain with the country.

Many of the challenges faced by the Heiveld are associated with national and global challenges. The financial melt-down of 2008-09 had a profound impact on demand for rooibos, both in the retail and wholesale markets. Wholesalers became more cautious about buying large stocks, and cut orders.

The need for more land is an absolute necessity and all members believe that this is their most serious challenge. Thus, more effective land reform in which small-scale farmers are given access and assisted with financial requirements is pertinent. However, an even more serious challenge to the long-term success of the Co-operative is global warming. In a region that already receives very little rainfall, receiving only 125 to 300 mm of rain a year, the effects of increased temperatures and decreased rainfall could threaten the viability of the region. Indeed, the 2004 harvest was severely affected by the drought in the area producing a very low yield.

An additional serious challenge has been the entry into the fair trade market of large-scale commercial farmers. Competition by large-scale producers whose production costs are far lower and whose operations are well capitalised has had a negative impact in overseas markets. Consumers tend to believe that if they are buying rooibos certified by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO) they are buying the produce of small scale producers. This has weakened the market position of small scale producers.

In 2008 the provincial governments of the Northern Cape and Limpopo launched three linked initiatives designed to stimulate local economic development. The first was a marketing initiative on the part of a Limpopo-based state-owned company to market a range of South African teas on the international market, including rooibos from Nieuwoudtville, and the purchase of rooibos from local farmers at prices well above the current market prices. The second is the construction of a 34 million Rand tea processing and packaging facility in the village of Nieuwoudtville, designed to supply the Limpopo company. The third, designed to generate larger volumes of rooibos from small farmers and thus provide an adequate political justification for the investment of public funds in the factory, is a scheme to provide conventionally produced (i.e. non-organic) rooibos plant material and diesel to small scale farmers free of charge. The impact on the Heiveld has been mixed. The financial incentive to members to plant non-organic plant material has been enormous, particularly as the government-supplied diesel has been allocated on the basis of the hectares of non-organic rooibos that small-scale producers applied to plant. Small-scale farmers have been told that they will be allocated shares in the company that will own the new plant on the basis of the tea that they deliver to it, and that this will also be at no cost to themselves.

These measures have been designed to ensure that all local rooibos is delivered to the state-

supported enterprises. However the impact on the Heiveld and its members has been mixed. The past three seasons have seen enormous growth in production on the part of the Heiveld members, resulting in unsold stocks being accumulated and cash-flow constraints. The Heiveld Board thus introduced policy measures in 2009 to limit the amount of rooibos purchased, and encouraged members to deliver rooibos to the state factory. Members have developed a deeper appreciation for the more human face of the Heiveld.

## **Sustainability**

### **Lessons learned:**

The Heiveld started with no external funding and built on profound local knowledge of the production and processing of Rooibos Tea. Once the farmers decided to found a co-operative they realized that it is crucial for the business to bank on the competitive advantage of an organic and fair way of production and be able to control the entire process from processing to exporting. It is important to emphasise that the Heiveld in the beginning needed strong and continuous support for getting up and managing what became quite quickly a large and complex business. The consideration of a local presence of support organisations - in this case two local NGOs – was and is still key for the success of the Co-op. Once the capacity development had progressed, the Heiveld became increasingly more independent and trained office staff to run the day to day business under the supervision of the board.

The Heiveld has encountered many demanding situations to date and has developed a strong problem solving capacity. The ongoing coaching and extensive networks were critical factors to move ahead and to learn from challenges.

However, marketing an agricultural product to a limited market is always demanding. Therefore it is important to keep ahead to maintain a sustainable business – this can be challenging as it is dependent on the global situations.

Sustainability in a changing world remains an ideal that is difficult to attain or plan for. Climatic and economic events are unpredictable and expose small businesses to great risks. The concentration of economic opportunity in the large centres, coupled with higher levels of education in post-Apartheid South Africa, tend to enhance the desirability of urban life-styles amongst the youth. Families that face the “brain drain” of talented youth struggle to sustain their farming enterprises. As these farming families are the basis of the Heiveld, these influences also impact on the sustainability of the Co-operative.

The Heiveld has successfully drawn on the traditional knowledge and skills of its members, with numerous positive outcomes: their product is appreciated for the high quality resulting from the use of traditional tea-making methods, and the members express pride in their knowledge, culture and achievements. In this way the sustainability of the organisation is also enhanced.

Altogether, the Heiveld and its success form an essential part of the larger struggle for cooperative-based empowerment. An ever-increasing number of members and their families are benefitting of the new sense of solidarity and commitment in the local community through the work of the Heiveld and the two local-based NGOs, EMG and Indigo development & change. With growing selfbelief and self-confidence the Co-op is advancing black economic empowerment in the historically disadvantaged community of the Suid Bokkeveld. In addition, the Heiveld contributes to the conservation of traditional heritage and biodiversity in the area.



The sustainable and organic methods of production, coupled to action research to identify and develop adaptation strategies helps farmers to face possible impacts of climate change.

### **Transferability:**

Whereas methodology is broadly transferrable, and business strategies can be emulated, it is not possible to transfer the “model” as such. However, just as peer knowledge exchanges played a significant role in the formation of the Heiveld, they continue to play a role in sharing experiences with other small-farmers enterprises such as the Eksteenskuil Agricultural Co-operative and the Wupperthal Rooibos Small Farmer Co-operative.

A range of publicity material of the Co-op reflects the various aspects of sustainable production, such as ecological research undertaken in association with the Co-op. Also the integration in the work of EMG persuades a broad platform to share experiences and research or project results with other organisations – national and international. Especially the work towards capacity development, conservation of traditional heritage on a foundation of respect and tolerance and a sense of solidarity and commitment in the community can be transferred to other regions and rural communities.

On the international level, participation by the Heiveld in international movements such as fair trade and slow food, as well as the promotions undertaken with fair trade partners in the north, make it possible to spread the experiences of the Heiveld and strategies that its members have adopted for climate change adaptation. The engagement of EMG and Indigo development & change in documenting the experiences and sharing these have also contributed to a wider audience becoming aware of the approach taken by the Heiveld, its challenges and successes.

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