

RICHARDS BAY MINERALS' RURAL EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE PROGRAMME

When RBM began mining operations near Richards Bay in 1976, poverty was rife in the neighbouring rural community of Mbonambi. Schools were over-crowded and ill-equipped, some of them no more than a collection of mud huts. Crops were sparse and there was no running water or electricity. There were also no clinics in the area which meant that disease was common as a result of poor nutrition, contaminated water supplies and unhygienic toilets.

These circumstances spawned a rural health care and education programme which has grown over the years to benefit 185 000 people living in the rural areas of Mbonambi, Sokhulu and Mpukunyoni.

Education

In 1977, RBM conducted a research survey to determine the needs and priorities of the Mbonambi community. Based on this research, discussions were held with school principals in the area and RBM gradually began to initiate joint education projects: building and equipping classrooms, introducing a bus service for schools, training teachers, funding the salaries of privately paid teachers until they were taken over by the education authorities, and introducing projects to improve the quality of education in the area. These initiatives have expanded to encompass the following:



The library of one of the RBM-supported schools in Mbonambi.

- RBM has built 5 complete rural schools and 214 new classrooms, and has renovated a further 197 classrooms in 28 rural schools and 10 pre-school facilities for the benefit of 29 000 pupils.
- Library books and laboratory equipment are provided where needed.
- Training programmes have improved the management and classroom skills of teaching staff.
- Supplementary educational programmes in schools are improving the skills of rural pupils in science, mathematics, English language and communication.

- Sports coaching is introduced at schools which previously had no sports tuition or facilities.
- Entrepreneurship training is being promoted in schools, teaching pupils to start their own businesses before they leave school.
- Adult literacy classes have helped transform the lives of almost 200 rural women, some as old as 70 years, enabling them to undertake for the first time tasks that literate people take for granted.

Health care

The health care programme started when a flood of people from Mbonambi appeared at the opening of RBM's occupational health clinic in 1976, all seeking medical care. At that time a lack of funds prevented the health authorities from providing more than an infrequent mobile clinic service plagued by

breakdowns. RBM clinic staff soon began treating cases ranging from maternity patients to victims of assault, snake bites and crocodile attacks.

Because of the overwhelming demand, RBM started an outreach programme: a company nurse drove to a communal gathering point every week with a stock of medicines and educational health pamphlets. A talk on preventive health care was followed by a full day of treating patients until it became too dark to see or until medical supplies ran out.

It soon became clear that more was needed and, after consultation with the provincial health authorities and the community, a number of joint initiatives were started. These include:

- Five primary health care clinics, built and equipped by RBM, have been handed over to the community, with RBM paying the salaries of clinic staff initially. They now fall under the KZN Department of Health's Ngwelezane Hospital. The clinics received more than 136 000 visits during 2000 and have dramatically improved the general health and wellbeing of the community.
- Nine community health workers have been trained to provide home-based care at grassroots level. Although RBM currently pays their salaries, they work under Ngwelezane Hospital.
- A preventive health education programme is conducted by clinic staff and community health workers involving lectures and discussion groups at clinics, schools and community meetings. These focus on TB, HIV/Aids, malaria, diabetes, mental health, family planning and immunisation. A programme to promote HIV/Aids awareness amongst rural primary school children using drama as a medium reaches 800 pupils in eight rural primary schools every year.



Nelson Velly Nene (left) and a group of post-matric students trained by DramaAide present an AIDS awareness play for pupils of Nzalabantu Primary School in Mbonambi near Richards Bay as part of a one-year programme sponsored by nearby Richards Bay Minerals.

- Other programmes which impact on health are run in partnership with the local community, teaching residents how to grow their own produce, cook nutritious meals for their families, build affordable water wells, purify water and install hygienic toilets.

The RBM education and primary health care programme is part of a comprehensive rural development programme run by the company in partnership with local communities which also focuses on agriculture and job creation.

Sustainability

It is RBM's plan to continue this programme of transferring skills, building new structures and handing them over to government departments and local communities for the lifetime of the mine so that the projects are sustainable when, at some time in the future, RBM may cease to operate in the area.

Comment by Miss Thabisile Mlotshwa, Secretary of the Mbonambi Community Development Council and Mbonambi Crèche Co-ordinator

'RBM help the Mbonambi Community by building schools for them, to help pupils from going long distances for education. RBM build schools in each and every ward (district).

They also help crèches with the need of the children and the renovation of the centres of the children. We have creches in each and every ward of the area. Education starts from lower level in our area because of RBM.

We have women who are the community health workers who are coming from the community. They are helping us in different diseases, they are helping us in our homes. Even if you don't have money to go to clinic they are helping with first aid until you get money to go to clinic. All of that is the help from our local company which is RBM.'