

Bold EC macadamia nut project unlocks opportunity in the rural space

The Amajingqi rural community in Willowvale is set for a major socio-economic transformation when 300 hectares earmarked for macadamia plantations is completed in April 2017.

Spearheaded by East Cape Macadamia (ECM), the project is the second macadamia growing site in the Eastern Cape's coastal belt between East London and Bizana. Starting out with Ncera Macadamia Farming outside East London 10 years ago, ECM is targeting a total of 4,200 hectares for new macadamia plantations in partnership with rural communities and emerging farmers.

ECM has a bold plan to plant one million macadamia trees over the next 20 years. With expertise in macadamia plantation development, processing and marketing, ECM partners with the community in target rural areas and forms an operating company, of which the community owns a 51% share.

The project is based on a community-private partnership model through which government invests in infrastructure on behalf of the communities in order to develop the province's macadamia industry.

Inaugurated Chief of the Amajingqi Traditional Council, Chief Ngwenyathi Dumalisile, says: "Not only does the community hold land usage rights and manage the 80-year land lease on behalf of the community; but 300 sustainable jobs will be created for the community, proceeds from profits will be ploughed back to the community, and the community also has the first right of refusal for procurement, jobs and skills transfer."

"Upon visiting the Ncera Macadamia Farming project outside East London, we [as the Amajingqi Traditional Authorities] saw that the macadamia project is well-aligned to the aspirations of our own area's long-term industrial strategy, *Kulo-Jingqi*," explains Chief Dumalisile.

"The area's three-pronged strategy focuses on education and skills development, agriculture and renewable energy, and is aimed at turning Amajingqi into a self-reliant and sustainable community.

"Hence, we welcomed the partnership with ECM to form the operating company, Amajingqi Macadamia Farming (AMF). Through AMF, we have been able to introduce upskilling initiatives and establish a foundation for a sustainable agricultural value chain in our area," explains Chief Dumalisile.

The area's population of about 9,500 residents live in impoverished conditions, with the youth making up 65% of the population and 54% being females.

AMF's field officer, Lwando Mnqweno, 35, is one of 93 Amajingqi residents that have been employed by AMF since the start of the project in 2015.

"I was unemployed for about five years before I joined the macadamia nut project. I could not make a contribution at home, and life was tough living with two elderly parents' dependent on the social grant. In just over a year, I can see the positive change the project has brought to my life. So many others also improving their lives now that we have a stable income," says Mnqweno.

"I feel truly empowered as my involvement in the project is not limited to planting in the fields, but I also play a supervisory role now that we have commenced with the new planting season at the beginning of the month."

"Before we started planting here in Amajingqi, we [as the community workers] were also trained in land preparation, planting, fertilisation up to harvesting. We also receive ongoing training from the Services SETA on subjects like new venture creation, project support services and business administration services," adds Mnqweno.

To date, a total of 100 hectares have been planted in the Amajingqi community. Community workers are preparing land in order to complete the additional 200 hectares earmarked for macadamia nut plantations in the Amajingqi area.

The macadamia trees are sourced from the five-star Ncera Macadamia Farming nursery that has been accredited by the Southern African Macadamia Growers Association.

"The young trees have already started changing the scenery and beautifying the landscape," says Chief Ngwenyathi Dumalisile.

ECM Chairperson Lindiwe Hendricks is optimistic that the project will unlock rural wealth and harness the youth human resource potential creation within the rural space.

"ECM has made tangible strides in building the first community-owned macadamia value chain in South Africa," says Hendricks.

"Over the past ten years, we introduced a novel community-private partnership model that incorporates a long-term lease agreement, signed by the community and operating company, and which resolves rural land access

constraints which tend to deter private sector investment.

“The model, adopted by national government to implement the macadamia project in Kwa Zulu Natal, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, also puts specific focus on women and youth empowerment through skills transfer and wealth creation,” Hendricks adds.

“Since macadamia trees last about 100 years, this guarantees earnings for rural communities from the leasing of their land as well as sustainable jobs in the growing and operations of the project,” she ends.