

UNIVERSITY OF VENDA SHOWCASES HOW IT EFFECTIVELY EMPOWERS RURAL COMMUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THEIR LIVES

Compiled by

J. Francis, W. Mabogo, D. Musarurwa, M.B. Ramulongo and B. Kilonzo

The 20th of October 2016 will forever remain a key landmark in the life of the University of Venda (UNIVEN) with respect to its community engagement work. On this day, from 1115-1730h, we pasted our indelible mark on the African university landscape when we successfully ran a parallel session during the Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference held from 17-21 October 2016. The University of Venda's Vice Chancellor and Principal, Prof Peter Mbatlana, chaired the parallel session. Prof Joseph Francis, the Director of the Institute for Rural Development (IRD), facilitated the showcasing of the engaged work designed to foster and sustain social integration, improved academic performance and community development.



In his opening address, Prof Mbatlana highlighted the importance that UNIVEN attached to community engagement. He revealed that in 2009 the University established a Directorate with the mandate to promote and coordinate campus-wide community engagement. Furthermore, the IRD was established specifically to spearhead implementation of social emancipation and development activities in rural areas in line with the university vision, viz. "To be at the centre of tertiary



education for rural and regional development in Southern Africa". Apart from this there was also the Vuwani Science Centre which championed the popularisation and teaching of science, technology and Mathematics in local high schools. Prof Mbatlana also pointed out that such flagship initiatives had been included in the university

strategic plan, 2016-2020 because of our desire to consolidate our gains in community engagement. Soon after the Vice Chancellor and Principal's address, he handed over the facilitation to Prof Francis to steer the parallel session to completion.



Chief Njhakanjhaka (Mr Hlekani Samuel Mukari) and Mrs Mafanedza Rosemary Mufamadi, a former Ward Councillor in Makhado Municipality jointly took to the

podium soon after Prof Mbati's opening address. Leading their joint presentation, Hosinkulu (Chief) Njhakanjhaka revealed that local communities and leaders yearned for reciprocal relationships with universities, pointing out that UNIVEN was exemplary and a role model in this regard. Furthermore, there were many initiatives which UNIVEN was running and were central in improving people's livelihoods. The Chief advised that open communication, trustful relationships, mutual respect, deployment of experts who would jointly implement programmes and encourage community members to champion their own development were the critical ingredients of successful engaged work.

Coming soon after the university and community leaders' session was Dr Segun Obadire's presentation, which highlighted the strategic thrust of the International Relations Directorate and its flagship projects. He pointed out that the 'Buddies' programme was the major initiative because it sought to build, continuously nurture and sustain social cohesion among students irrespective of nationality, in particular. Thereafter, attention of the parallel session shifted towards flagship community engagement initiatives.





Dr Makondelele Makatu articulated how the School of Health Sciences at UNIVEN had embraced and continuously applied problem-based learning in its teaching and learning enterprise. She explained that problem-based learning entailed students learning through engaging in discussion and finding solutions to

real life challenges. In the process, students and facilitators serve as co-learners, co-planners, co-producers and co-evaluators of the learning. Dr Makatu's presentation marked the end of the pre-lunch parallel session deliberations.

Soon after lunch, Mr Dzikamai Musarurwa (Masters student) and MsMpho



Netshisumbewa (3rd year Bachelor of Accounting degree student), made a joint presentation on *Developing a Culture of Entrepreneurship in Rural Communities through*

Student-initiated Projects: Enactus UNIVEN. The presentation focused on how our Enactus students were promoting entrepreneurship in various communities in Vhembe District. They clarified what Enactus stood for and how it worked, including the university and external support that made its work possible. The two representatives used a highly captivating audiovisual of Enactus members participating in a national inter-university competition in which it won awards in various categories considered.



The next presentation was on the *Amplifying Community Voices (ACV)* approach, which the IRD has been developing since 2006. Leading the presentation was Prof Francis who used a



cocktail of games, cartoons, photographs and statistics to build a case for democratising development practice in rural communities. He then ushered in Mrs Mushaisano Agnes Mathaulula (Lecturer in the IRD) to talk about how the ACV was

being applied to innovatively build, promote and nurture social cohesion through sport and selected theatre for community action activities such as debates, essay writing, dance and drama. She pointed out that this was closely-aligned with celebration or commemoration of national and international holidays.

Space was also created for the Amplifying Community Voices Students Association to share its engaged work under the mentorship of the ACV



leadership. Mr Mushe Brownley Ramulongo (Organising Secretary and 3rd year year LLB student) and Mukhethwa Patience Mannzhi (Treasurer and 2nd year BSc Hydrology and Water Resources student) narrated how they mobilised and organised students to actively spearhead responsible citizenship and social change

work. They pointed out that although ACVoSA encountered numerous challenges, it still scored various successes and was firmly putting its stamp on the landscape of various communities. In the process, ACVoSA was proving to be a unique opportunity that helped students to become socially responsible and entrepreneurial as they learnt new things and transformed into better citizens who value people and society in general.



Dr Beata Kilonzo then further showcased how the ACV approach was applied in partnership with the Sibasa Circuit of the Department of Basic Education in a 25 primary school-focused diagnostic and opportunity survey of food gardening, which was made possible by funding from the WesBank Foundation through Tshikululu Social Investments and the UNIVEN Research and Publication Committee. She reported that the participatory community-based research led to the development of a model of a school food gardening that would serve as an open laboratory for learners. Moreover, she indicated that the school food garden was an opportune platform to demonstrate how transdisciplinary research and innovation involving university students, academics and communities can be conducted.

The community representative, Mrs Mufamadi spoke about the ACV last. She



narrated her experiences, when she was a Ward Councillor, in implementing the ACV approach. In her opinion, the approach was effective in breaking the four walls of the University (i.e. UNIVEN) and highlighted how various communities including hers in the Municipality were empowered. Mrs Mufamadi singled out the fact that ACV

created a rare opportunity for community members, including anyone at least seven years old from many participating municipal wards to work as a collective in championing their own development. She went on to say that this was important because it created an atmosphere where people no longer blamed the local municipality for their predicament and made them understand that they should work closely with the government to co-construct solutions to local challenges.



Hosi Njhakanjhaka chipped in and echoed similar sentiments. He announced that this was the reason why the Royal and Traditional Councils of his community had seen it fit to mandate him to seek the assistance of UNIVEN's IRD to facilitate the crafting of the Njhakanjhaka Community Development Plan. The latter would go a long way in assisting with forging partnerships for development as well as make the residents of Njhakanjhaka community own the life improvement agenda implemented there. He concluded by saying, "If this is done, I have no doubt that no one will ever see violent protests in villages under my jurisdiction. Who will they be fighting given that they will be leading development from the front?"

The Dean of Agriculture, Prof Godwin Mchau, delivered the closing remarks.



He appreciated the participation of the conference delegates in the parallel session and thanked them for the robust engagement that characterised it. Of particular importance were the inputs and questions, which he said would help the university to reflect and use to sharpen the on-going work and new initiatives.

The presentations generated a lot of interest among participants. A wide range of questions, clarifications and suggestions were posed.



Some of the participants who asked questions, sought clarification and made suggestions

Below is a selection of the personal reflections of some delegates and members of the UNIVEN team that ran the successful parallel session.

"I am impressed by what I witnessed in this parallel session. However, the missing link is how all this good work links with the curriculum of the university" (Mr Moses Waswa, RUFORUM Secretariat)

.....Throughout the whole conference, we handled ourselves very well and above all that, we showed great team spirit amongst ourselves. One could not have believed that the team was comprised of different individuals representing different units at our university. As undergraduate students, we were very skeptical about taking the stand and presenting. However, our leader Prof. Francis managed to calm our nerves by making jokes and that really made me and my fellow students to calm down and I think we presented very well. The presence of the Vice Chancellor, Prof. Mbatia, at our side event really made a huge impact to us because we had to put all the stops to show him that indeed his students were taking giant steps in terms of community engagement" (Mpho Nethisumbewa, Enactus)

"The conference was an eye opener. It came to my attention that there are a lot of community engagement initiatives at the University of Venda which are not well marketed. If these initiatives are marketed most students will benefit from them and contribute to self-development and improvement of quality of life in the communities around." (D. Musarurwa)

"For me as an undergraduate student, the major highlight was presenting at an international conference in front of Vice Chancellors, Professors and other senior academics" (MP Maanzhi)

"....It was exciting and appreciable having our Vice Chancellor from start to finish. The presentations that Hosinkulu Njhakanjhaka and Mrs Mufamadi as community leaders demonstrated in a very eloquent manner that indeed we are a community-engaged university. Anyone who cared to notice, could see that we were like a well-knit family" (Prof J. Francis)

"...During my presence here I have been listening attentively to the discussions presented here and I find it worth taking back home. I believe when we go back home we will be better informed on how to partner with universities and other stakeholders represented here in order to bring development....." (Hosinkulu Njhakanjhaka)

"....Our parallel session was entertaining and kept every person awake. There were people who mistakenly came to our hall but couldn't leave because of what was happening. Our presentations were very unique As a student I always thought an undergraduate cannot present in an international conference but this opportunity proved me wrong. It was also my first time being in the company of the Vice Chancellor and senior academics for so long...." (MB Ramulongo, ACVoSA Organising Secretary)

".....The participation of the international audience in our parallel session was very helpful because we managed to harvest inputs and comments that will further assist to fine tune our community engagement approaches..... RUFORUM conference managed to expose us as emerging researchers to a professional gathering and provided avenues for strengthening communication of community-based research." (Mrs MA Mathaulula, Lecturer)

".....It was evident that the four pillars of community engagement at the University of Venda are interrelated and interconnected. It was also evident that community engagement is not only implemented by staff members, but also students who also take leadership of their projects seriously and successfully. Students are active and confident in what they do in, with and to different communities" (Dr M. Makatu, Senior Lecturer)

"...Based on our experiences we need to develop models that can assist management to deal with student issues..... demonstrated to other universities how UNIVEN deals with issues affecting its students and staff in a humane and respectful way" (Dr S. Obadire, International Relations Directorate)

"I believe we achieved more than what we hoped for. It must be because we planned together what we wanted to do and how to do it.participants were fascinated with our way of engaging" (Ms S. Sathekge, International Relations Directorate)

"...I have also realized that once people have done something on their own, they claim ownership of the product and they also safeguard it" (Mrs MR Mufamadi, former Ward Councillor)

"...I therefore urge members of the Institute for Rural Development and Community Engagement to constantly share the good stories with the Department of Communications and Marketing so that the information could be shared with both internal and external stakeholders" (Mr T. Dzaga, Director Communications and Marketing)



The Vice Chancellor and Principal Prof P Mbatl, seated in the front row together with the Dean School of Agriculture, Prof GRA Mchau and IRD Director Prof J Francis, Community Representatives and the University of Venda staff and Students who participated in the RUFORUM conference and contributed to the success of the parallel session.