

Sappi Forests acknowledges International Day of Rural Women

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With around 4,000 women employed directly or indirectly by Sappi Forests nationwide - through its own personnel in its nurseries, and sub-contracted to its harvesting and silviculture contractors - the company is very aware of the crucial role that rural women play in the agricultural labour force.



Doris Mdladla

It is to these women that the United Nations have dedicated the International Day of Rural Women, celebrated on 15 October every year. Fittingly, the theme for this year is “Building rural women’s resilience in the wake of Covid-19” and highlights the fact that the specific struggles that rural women face in their daily lives were further aggravated by the pandemic. World Food Day is another significant UN commemorative day which follows immediately on 16 October and further ties in the crucial role that rural women play in combating top on the list of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1 ‘No Poverty’ and SDG2 ‘Zero Hunger’).

In addition to literally providing the backbone for the forestry industry, rural women are also pivotal in contributing to agricultural production, food security and nutrition, land and natural resource management in the country. Along with this, they also perform the bulk of unpaid care and domestic work within families and households, a fact that goes largely unheralded in our country. In addition to often being the breadwinner in a family, they are also the ones who prepare the bread and lovingly serve it, nurturing and nourishing their families.

Besides creating an honest income for many of these women through the creation of jobs in the forestry industry, many other women have also been introduced to the forestry value chain by becoming timber suppliers to Sappi.

The Sappi Khulisa programme is an example of an empowering initiative which has around 2,700 rural women participants, who supply Sappi with timber. What started out back in 1983 as tree-farming scheme aimed at subsistence farmers and which involved only three farmers working eight hectares of land, is now a successful supplier and entrepreneurship development model contributing towards sustainable livelihoods in rural areas, which has earned more than R4bn cash for its participants since its inception. Today more than 4,000 small growers and 67 land reform projects, working more than

34,000ha of land, harvested and delivered timber to Sappi and earned R382m in 2019.



Mama Ngema

One such woman who has found success with the programme is Sappi Khulisa grower, Bhekekile Ngema from Ngudwini, in southern Zululand. Mama Ngema (82), is a sprightly and knowledgeable grower, who started tree farming in 1965 when she got married to her late husband and has never looked back. She initially had a small piece of land and they would only supply logs to the Sappi mill with a two-tier truck, until she saw a gap to expand by partnering with Sappi Khulisa, something that has brought advancement to her family and her tree-farming business. Since joining Sappi Khulisa, Mama Ngema, has sent three of her children to university to study teaching – an achievement she values highly.

“It brings me great happiness to have three qualified teachers in our household. I live in a decent house for someone my age, which was all built through my Sappi Khulisa profits. With forestry, once you get in, you will never want to come out – the benefits are worth working hard for,” says Mama Ngema.

Mama Ngema mentions that she now has someone looking after her plots and only provides advice and guidance due to her age. “My success would not have been possible if it was not for the Sappi Khulisa team. They regularly keep in contact and physically visit me to drop off weighbridge tickets and offer me great advice on how to grow my forestry business,” she adds.

Another long-serving Khulisa grower is Doris Mdladla (57) – a Sokhulu based timber supplier who has been part of the Khulisa programme since the early 90s. Doris exemplifies how hard work, determination and looking past adversities can bring success in the forestry industry.

“My late husband encouraged me to join him when we started working with Khulisa and my love for forestry made it easy for me to work with him. Unfortunately, he had a massive stroke in 2005, which meant I had to step up and hold the fort in the family business. Through the assistance of Khulisa, I have been able to live-off my combined 15-hectare plots and send my children to university. I am proud to say we have a teacher and an agriculture professional in our home. We have built a 12-room house worth over R500,000 and bought ourselves a family car through our Sappi Khulisa profits,” says Doris.

Mama Doris also mentions that through the Khulisa earnings she has been able to maintain a successful maize meal and banana garden, which supplies vendors from all over Zululand – who then resell her products. “My husband passed on in 2012, but I am sure he is proud of what our family has achieved through our partnership with Sappi Khulisa. I am very thankful to the Sappi team for always providing us with advice and forestry knowledge. My advice to other Khulisa suppliers is to love your work and to treat your plots as a fixed deposit, that will bear interest when you harvest. Make full use of the land you have, and you will gain success!” says Doris.

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Sappi



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