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Thlolego Project

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[Presentation Report]

Thlolego is located in the north west of South Africa, which is now divided into nine provinces. Previously the area was Bhoputatswana. In South Africa since the end of apartheid, changes have been positive and negative. People had incredibly high expectations of the government: provision of jobs, education, health care etc. But these have been slow to be fulfilled. Progress is slow. Politicians have not been able to deliver on promises, but things are gradually changing.

The previous system forcibly removed people to a barren homelands area, in which rainfall is low and erratic. Families were unable to support themselves and the men usually were forced to migrate to the cities for work, leaving the women and children behind. This led to Soweto-type urban developments – townships with few services and virtually no ability to produce food. Families were split. The social system broke down.

To counter this, Thlolego is concerned to provide low-cost housing, permaculture teaching and demonstration, and to work towards village development using 'experts' where needed to advise how to counter linear development which occurred under apartheid.

Thlolego is a former Afrikaaner farm which badly degraded the land. Purchased three years ago, it is held by the RUCORE trust, an educational trust, of which Thlolego is part. Funding originally came from the South African Development Bank, which provided seed funding for sustainable development. Thlolego has 3 aspects:

- the courses, available to people from all over the northern province,
- the village, consisting of 18 adults and 15 children, who live and work there,
- the farm school, built under apartheid for children.

General history

Old patterns were circular, new patterns are linear. Moving back to old patterns. One of the problems is working with South African people whose understanding of

the concept is that it means national park, not their own immediate environment. Thlolego is getting people to see that they can control their immediate environment and take responsibility for it. The government itself pays lip service to sustainability, sees permaculture as being very slow but is happy to support projects as demonstration sites.

The centre

There are demonstration gardens for teaching, open pollination testing for plants suitable for African conditions. Local people want seeds when they visit and see how effective it is. Seed saving is encouraged. Many people have never seen earthworms, and all take a bag of earthworms with them when they leave. The area is deficient in large animals. They have started small scale animals such as rabbits and chickens, but need to upscale soon.

The Natural Farming Network in Zimbabwe has published several books, one on natural control of pests. At Thlolego they found that helicopter beetles love blue so they put blue buckets of water around the grounds and the beetles dive bomb into them and commit suicide. They have a chicken tractor system. Chickens are important but more work is needed to integrate the chickens into the gardens. A US architect made a chicken coop but it turned out not to be appropriate. But they have a good rabbit hutch system. Rabbit meat is an important part of the Tswana diet.

In autumn they save seeds. One Tswana woman is now training others how to save seed, in the Tswana language.

There is a composting toilet, which is in high demand from all who see it. Two aquaculture systems, gardens, large compost heaps. Greywater re-use system which is being replicated in other areas. They are now building in earth brick, according to a design drawn up by Buddy, an American, in consultation with village people. This popular design will be built several times by Thlolego village people and then they will go into business building for people outside.

They are teaching forest management. Teaching literacy. Using interactive methods to teach about budgeting and producing community designs.

Finally permaculture is a way for whites and blacks to work together positively and is seen therefore as a means of reconciliation.