



*Proceedings of the Sixth International Permaculture Conference
September-October 1996, Perth, Western Australia*

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Permaculture Outreach Work with Impoverished Rural Communities

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[Presentation Report]

Shirley Sifunda:

EcoLink is a Non Governmental Organisation. Our mission statement is:

“To enhance the quality of life for people in their own environment. To do this by responding with knowledge, skills and equipment and an understanding of how people are related to the natural resources on which all life depends. EcoLink is wholly committed to assisting the disadvantaged people through self-help projects, while creating a better quality of life in an environmentally sensitive and sustainable manner.”

Permaculture is a tool which can be used to fight poverty and will enable the people to use their resources in order to develop. Its aim is to create systems which will help sustain life, not only in the present, but also for future generations. It is a useful resource because it shows us how to identify community needs and how to create job opportunities.

As a community worker, I work in many different situations, in schools, prisons, and communities, and see much poverty in all of these areas. My first priority is to show the women how to make a trench garden and plant foods that can feed their family. At the same time, they learn how to clean their area and use the waste for their gardens. A trench garden is dug 1 metre wide by 2 metres long and 45 cm. deep. It is then filled with tins (for iron), bones (for calcium), paper (for retaining water) and the soil is then replaced.

The next step is to grow enough vegetables not only to feed their own family but also to sell and make an income for themselves. As this develops, the women join together and form cooperatives, which in turn can grow into Eco-villages.

The juvenile prisoners with whom I work make Wonder Boxes which are sold to the communities. These Wonder Boxes have cushions with polystyrene fillings and are used for cooking.

Malnutrition is a serious problem in the communities, as many of their diets lack the three basic food groups. The physical weakness results in the breakdown of the natural immune system. Another problem which faces the communities is unemployment, which results from isolation and poor communication.

With the help of slides and photographs, I showed how the communities in which Eco-Link works are showing initiative and are earning incomes and creating job opportunities for others. Apart from gardening, many are now involved in recycling. I think this initiative must be encouraged and supported. I am looking forward to helping the communities design two schools and two permaculture projects once I have the necessary sponsorship. I see permaculture as a development tool.

I am also involved in a project called 'Inforeach,' and read scripts which supply information to the communities on various subjects, eg. information on how to improve nutrition and health, how to plant fruit trees, storing and preserving, marketing, etc. Information is given over the radio and also written information is distributed and discussed with the communities. People in the communities then start implementing what they have learned.

Mike Masuku:

I welcomed the audience with a short song about permaculture which I composed myself. It goes like this:

Give me that old permaculture (x3)
It's good enough for me
It was good for Adam and Eve (x3)
And it is good enough for me.

I like this song because it relieved me of my stage fright, and it also captured my listeners' attention.

The topic was: 'Permaculture Outreach Work with Impoverished Rural Communities.' With the help of a map, I explained to the listeners where our province and EcoLink are situated and how we operate in our regions.

A Permaculture Design Course was introduced to the community members, teachers and pupils. Slides and photographs were shown to the audience. Through this they now know that we are still in the crawling stages with permaculture in our region. What impressed me is that although we are still far behind them, they showed a real interest in what we have done up to date.

We have many invitations from teachers and community members who are interested in permaculture, but we are unable to respond to them due to financial problems. It is really promising that we will be able to go ahead speedily if we can get some funds.

Shirley and I attended two workshops at Rustenburg which were conducted by Robyn McCurdy from New Zealand. Since then we found it very important to solve the problem of hunger in our community. People will no longer have to waste all their money on food, they can save some through permaculture. Permaculture is a

solution to a major problem in South Africa, especially in the rural places that we are working in.

Our biggest aim is to get enough funds so that it will be easy to introduce permaculture workshops and to expand it, as it is still new here in South Africa.

Finally, I explained how permaculture fits in with EcoLink's projects.