

Growing a community

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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Other than a small directional sign on the side of the road, Kylemore is one of those "dorpies" you'll blink and miss as you drive through the towering peaks and magnificent scenery of the Simonsberg Mountains outside Stellenbosch.

Located on the edge of the most affluent wine-growing areas of the country, the small town of around 4,000 people is a microcosm of what a previously disadvantaged communities truly is. Most adults are reliant on seasonal work as grape-pickers and with no other going concerns in Kylemore to provide employment, little social infrastructure and the lack of opportunities, come the inevitable social ills of hunger, despair and substance abuse.

Yet despite this bleak picture - and thanks to the support of an organisation called Imbali (flower in Zulu) - Kylemore has literally become the poster child of what can be achieved to improve the lot of poor people and restore their dignity.

Offshoot of Women for Peace

The story of Imbali began in Johannesburg where, as an offshoot of Women for Peace, members gave art lessons in rural schools. This rapidly grew into a myriad of programmes to support disadvantaged adults and children to enhance their quality of life.

In 2001, two of the original members of Imbali, Jeanne Bestbier-Bloch and Yvonne Wilson reached out to Kylemore to provide art education to the children in the community.

The fact that the children were too hungry to actually learn anything became apparent, and a soup kitchen and a meal with the art classes soon followed.



"Although an old established community with a remarkable level of generic skills and individual talent, Kylemore is still economically vulnerable with 60% of adults unemployed and the village socially deprived of community facilities," says Bestbier-Bloch.

Local resident, Eva Williams (now a director and Imbali project leader), and other community volunteers joined up, and since those early days, Imbali has blossomed into a team of 13 volunteers - each responsible for their own area of the non-profit organisation. Bestbier-Bloch is the coordinator, and as she rather modestly puts it - is only the fundraiser. But judging by the impressive list of foreign donors she has enticed, this is no small feat.

Magic Muffin project

"We are currently focused on eight projects in Kylemore including the Magic Muffin project that bakes up to 3,000 nutrient-enriched muffins daily - 750 of which are handed free of charge to undernourished children in the community together with a cup of soup which Eva cooks daily in huge pots. The rest of the muffins are sold in a number of coffee shops in Stellenbosch to sustain the project. Any income generated tops up the school's budget, as sadly there is not much coming in from the state."



"The same applies to the organic food gardens that we have set up at the primary and high schools. Veggies are grown for the soup pots and the excess is sold into the community to sustain the gardens and to top up the school budget. This is a desperately poor community and there is very little financial support for the schools from parents," she explains.

In addition to the food projects, Imbali has also set up a craft studio which produces beautiful beadwork and homeware.

"We are currently exploring the opportunity of setting up a social enterprise which will benefit the crafters and, in fact, a great number of people in the community. I truly hope to get this off the ground by 2017," Bestbier-Bloch says.

Additional projects

Besides these three projects, Imbali has also been instrumental in creating three childcare facilities, the Fredagh & Bernard Podlashuk Art and Educare Centre, a visual literacy project, a carpentry classroom and a school library. They have also partnered with the Culinary Arts Institute, which offers places to up to 10 Kylemore youngsters every year on its internationally recognised City & Guilds Service Course.

As that great man, Nelson Mandela once said: "It always seems impossible until it is done." Imbali and the hope it breathes into the village of Kylemore proves that statement to be patently true.

To find out more about Imbali and its story in Kylemore, go to www.imbaliwc.co.za.

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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