

## Chintsa Crafters are testing SA's bamboo market

Five crafters from an east coast resort near East London are helping to assess the readiness of the South African market for bamboo products as development financier, the Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC), continues with the implementation of one of its strategic agricultural processing initiatives, bamboo.



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The province, through the soon-to-be-registered co-operative Thuba Bamboo, is promoting the crop, which has a number of environmentally friendly and industrial uses, to be included in South Africa's industrial policy action plan. The development financier, together with its strategic partner, the Industrial Development Corporation, held a conference in East London last year, to assess and increase awareness of bamboo as a driver for rural economic development.

Following the event last year, ECDC received two business plans for small bamboo value-adding projects from Chintsa and Ndakana. Subsequently, ECDC agreed to fund both projects. "One of the biggest risks which the bamboo project faces is marketing," says ECDC project manager Ken Bern. "The Chintsa project is a pilot which includes all elements of a larger project, which is from harvesting through to production," he explains.

### **NPO provides business support**

Thuba Bamboo, which includes Lindelwa Jikwa, Zandile Zota, Nosipho Mdiza, Maureen Mngese and Noxo Mantyisi, will produce and sell bamboo products. In support of the entrepreneurs, Friends of Chintsa, a non-profit organisation, provides business support and training provided by Renewable Energy Solutions (RES) which has extensive experience in training on crops such as bamboo throughout the country.

Now in its fourth month, the project is off to a good start with the crafters having already undergone their training harvesting techniques, workshop and tool management and safety, production skills and quality control. Currently, the group is weaving with their hands, using young wet bamboo which is more pliable than its older, dry and stronger counterpart. Its produce includes bird feeders, wine racks, ladders, and trellises with the younger bamboo. "Although a small project, it will help feel out the market's needs and size," explains Bern.

Thuba Bamboo will receive ongoing support in the areas of small business skills and business mentoring from the Friends of Chintsa which focuses on improving education, social transformation and the environment in Chintsa. "It has been amazing to see this group of women embrace this project which is giving them a strong sense of purpose and motivation to succeed. The past four months have concentrated on skills development as every aspect of the project is new for the group and we can only approach the market when we are confident in our products," says Friends of Chintsa chairperson Michael Denison.

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