

Mhlanga, The Place We Call Home.

Mhlanga, A Place Of History, Culture, Dignity, And Pride.

Mhlanga, A Place Where Time Slows Down A Bit And A Person Can Think, Reflect, And Become Optimistic About The Future.

Mhlanga Development Forum Launch - Where There Is A Youth, There Is A Future.

Mhlanga is a village deep in rural Eastern Cape, surrounded by expansive farms with large herds of healthy cattle and fluffy white sheep.

The village falls under the Municipality of Emalahleni, and is made up of the small individual communities of Zwelitsha, Kalkfontein, Qaqeni, Bhankini, Cenkcele, Nxomfu, Ntlanjeni, Tafile, Siphongweni and Uitkyk.

Like most other rural areas is Mhlanga vastly under-developed, with important social infrastructure in very short supply.

The entire village of 5 000 people is serviced by one high school and one clinic. It is situated at the end of a network of rural roads which are generally bad, and becomes nigh impossible to navigate during and after heavy rains.

The village does not have a permanent police presence, no library, and almost no social activities of a developmental nature its youth can participate in.

In other words, where urban environments like towns and cities seems to have slow moved forward, is Mhlanga seemingly stuck firmly in the past.

With no permanently visible police presence is crime steadily on the increase, and the educational environment is such that very few students make it into the ranks of top performers of the province, much less the country.

Against this seemingly overly negative picture, is there an undeniable air of pride and eternal optimism in the village.

This is with good reason as Mhlanga has the distinction of having produced luminaries like Professor Loyiso Nongxa, the former Vice Chancellor of Wits University. Professor Nongxa is an intellectual giant highly regarded right around the world.

This Professor Nongxa served as a source of inspiration for a group of Mhlanga youths who got together in Cape Town in 2012 for a frank discussion on the social situation prevalent in the village.

This group included Phindile Ntliziywana, Xolisa Guzula, Mncedisi Mngqobozi and a few others, and the purpose of the talk was to explore various options that can be looked at which would make a positive difference in the lives of the people of Mhlanga.

This discussion was very fruitful, and the outcome of it was the formation of the Mhlanga Development Forum.

It was decided that the primary objective of the MDF, as it is called, will be to actively help the people of Mhlanga address the many societal problems which are preventing the village from moving forward.

These societal needs include, amongst others:

- Infrastructure development,
- Proper schools with facilities of similar quality as those found in urban areas,
- Roads,
- Health facilities, and
- The alleviation of the grinding poverty gripping the village by creating sustainable employment opportunities.

The idea for the Mhlanga Development Forum slowly matured into reality with encouraging support from the Mhlanga community, and the organization was officially launched on the 26th of December 2014.

The launch happened in an almost festive-like atmosphere, where it was preceded by a children's Christmas party organized by the organization.

With financial assistance from national companies like Pick n Pay, and a local butchery based in Dordrecht, was the MDF able to feed and entertain more than 165 kids from all over the village, giving them a Christmas to remember.

That was just the start as the MDF had the good fortune of many positive developments right from the onset.

One piece of good news from the MDF launch was that Nedbank, the national banking giant, gave a clear display of their responsibility to local communities by making a commitment to sponsor the Mhlanga Development Forum starting in 2015.

Another important element that made the MDF launch even more special was the fact that it was enthusiastically attended by hundreds of Mhlanga villagers.

Nothing gives a community development initiative more legitimacy than its support by the community it is targeted at. The Mhlanga Development Forum was fortunate in this aspect in that the community came out in numbers to witness the birth of an

organization that promised to make a profound difference in the community.

Guest speakers at the launch included the afore-mentioned Professor Nongxa, as well as the Executive Mayor of the Emalahleni Municipality, the Honourable Nomveliso Nyukwana and Councillor Mzamo Godla.

These leaders added significant stature to the launch and made sure everyone understood clearly that much hard work lies ahead for the Mhlanga Development Forum.

Professor Nongxa gave a moving speech as keynote speaker, and his address included a shopping list of social development areas the residents of Mhlanga expected the MDF to look at.

One critical social development issue that stood out is the vast inequalities that exist between rural and urban areas, and how this can be addressed such that Mhlanga takes a firm step into the future.

The speech made by Honorable Nyukwana stressed the importance of the MDF not operating like an island, but that it becomes inclusive of all its various stakeholders. The Executive Mayor also gave a clear undertaking of the Emalahleni Municipality's support of the MDF.

The launch festivities of the Mhlanga Development Forum were concluded by the hosting of a sports tournament, which included soccer, netball, and running competitions with participants from all over the village.

Superspar in Queenstown donated 250 bottles of water for the tournament, and a local soccer team, Green Lovers, won the soccer competition along with a full team soccer kit and gold medals for every member of the team.

The Mhlanga Development Forum, as one of its first social development acts, donated full kits for the netball and soccer teams of Sosebenza Senior Secondary School at the event. This kit was sponsored with much gratitude by Stuart's Joinery in Cape Town.

At the handing over ceremony of the netball and soccer kits the Chairperson of the Mhlanga Development Forum, Mr. Phindile Ntliziywana, promised that there are more positive developments in the pipeline for the people of Mhlanga.

Gratitude is a very important sentiment, and in his closing address Phindile showed the gratefulness of the MDF by firstly thanking the Mhlanga community who came out in large numbers to support the initiative.

He also thanked those Mhlanga households who made financial and material contributions to the launch event. Some of the contributions included live stock, which are very valuable items in the community.

Private companies that includes Pick `n Pay Retailers, Stuart Joinery, Nedbank, and SuperSpar gave significant financial and material support to the launch of the Mhlanga Development Forum, and these companies received a heartfelt Thank You!

Finally, the Chairperson made sure to thank the members of the MDF, who, across all 9 provinces, worked tirelessly to raise the funds that played such a critical role in making the MDF launch the success it turned out to be.

All in all, the Mhlanga Development Forum started off on a very positive step, where it showed that it will not pay lip service to being a force for change in the village.

The Mhlanga community perfectly understood what the MDF is all about, and their expectations means that the real work is only now starting.