

A funding crisis is threatening the existence of rural advice offices.

ERIKA OOSTHUYSEN explains why it is vital that these institutions continue to function.

# A crucial connection

**A**TINY back room, not much larger than a cupboard and almost hidden behind the local creche, houses the Alicedale advice office. It's a very humble setting for an organisation credited with launching a development initiative that has brought back hope to the dusty dorp.

Lying in a valley 30km from Grahamstown along a rough gravel road, Alicedale once prospered as a railway junction. Then recession set in, rapidly reducing the town to a dusty outpost. Hardest hit was the African population, the largest group in the town, today numbering about 9 000. Transnet retrenched large numbers of workers, drought forced the 25 local farmers to cut their work-force, and only one industry remained – Barkor – which produces expensive woolen rugs for urban markets.

In 1989 a visit from Masifunde, a Grahamstown-based aid organisation, sowed the seeds from which a local advice office bloomed. Two residents – one a unionist, the other employed by the South African Committee for Higher Education (Sached) – were elected by the local civic association, recalled from their jobs and sent for training in community development at the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre in the Transvaal.

Basic equipment for an office was begged or borrowed from friendly local shopkeepers. Although there was no money for salaries, the Alicedale advice office opened its doors a year after the Masifunde visit.

"Before we had the advice office, police arrested people all the time," the chairperson said. A certain warrant officer was seen as responsible for the repression but community calls for his removal were ignored until residents rallied to an advice office plan for a consumer boycott. Suddenly the "white town" took notice. The warrant officer was transferred and police have since thought twice before making an arrest.

Next, the advice office committee tackled education. The local school went up only to Std 7. After that, children had to go to Grahamstown to further their education – or leave school. Advice office appeals to the authorities proved unsuccessful, until they organised parents to camp out at the school.

The school has now been upgraded and one class is to be added every year so that by 1995 the school will have a matric class. Tertiary education used to be out of the question but the advice office, together with other local and regional organisations, set up Japaki, a bursary scheme for local students, with a grant from Volkswagen. Two Alicedale students are currently studying on Japaki bursaries.

The advice office identified unemployment as the biggest problem in Alicedale. They contacted the Department of Manpower and sent local residents to be trained in brick making, sewing and welding, also assisting the trainees to apply for funding. The same kind of help was given to pensioners struggling against inadequate pay-out arrangements.

Advice office intervention also led to the removal of a sewage dam

from the centre of the township, the tarring of township streets, electrification, allocation of 200 new sites to residents, and settlement of conflict in the local Ethiopian church.

In the last year, the advice office, the civic association and the committee from the "coloured" township have joined the white municipality to form a development forum to deal with problems in Alicedale.

The record of the Alicedale advice office confirms the finding of a recent study by the Social Change Assistance Trust (Scat) that advice offices in rural areas play a crucial role in community development. This study comes at a time when a funding crisis is threatening to close advice offices throughout the country.

The findings of the Scat study, conducted by social auditing specialist Willie van der Westhuizen, include the following:

- almost 70 percent of the advice offices studied are more than 40km from the nearest big town. Their isolation is intensified by an almost total lack of skilled service organisations;

- members of advice office committees generally play a key leadership role in their communities, although at least a third have received no training;

- advice offices consider their greatest successes to be upgraded facilities, new development projects and mediation in conflict situations;

- advice offices have had a real impact in three main areas: asserting justice, mainly in opposing police abuses, municipal exploitation and racist employers; calling the local authority to account; and improved facilities, mostly housing, followed by education and social services.

The 33 rural advice offices canvassed ran a total of 25 educational campaigns in 1993, including voter education and education for development. On average, each office had organised nearly four projects, ranging from obtaining grazing rights to successful land claims and setting up small businesses.

The report notes that the impact of advice offices as facilitators of development has been limited because of insufficient preparation. Support for their staff and committees, as well as their training needs, demand attention. Other problem areas include professionalism in management and services, dependence on outside funding and the under-representation of women (nearly 70 percent of the advice offices studied are male-dominated).

Nevertheless, rural advice offices have made significant development impacts, despite having little outside support. They have enabled communities to decide on local priorities and to control development processes. With a government that has committed itself to the development of rural communities, advice offices are now more important than ever. They are an essential link in any programme of rural reconstruction and development. ■

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