

# Co-op in Swaziland

After a long battle of more than a year to get affordable land, dismissed Swaziland miners have started an agricultural Co-operative on a 135 hectare farm on the banks of the Usuthu River.

When NUM President, James Motlatsi recently visited the Swazi National Ex-miners Multi-Purpose Co-op, he was lost for words. Before, there was just bushveld, thorn-trees, lots of mambas and a few crocodiles on the land. Now, only two months after production started, the members have turned the veld into a farm.

"Next time you come, you'll be able to pull one of our carrots out of the ground and taste it for yourself," promised a member of the Co-op.

They have built accommodation, a large store-room, and are building a kitchen. They have laid the irrigation pipes for their vegetables, and their nursery has carrots, onions, and cabbage seedlings already growing.

Comrade Robert Hlatshwayo, Chairperson of the Co-op says "We had to clear five hectares of land by hand because the government promised to send a bulldozer to clear the land for planting; but as the days went by, we decided we cannot wait, we must start planting as soon as possible."

By the time NUM's President visited the farm, the first bean crop was already sprouting out of the ground. But there has been no rain in Swaziland. "You have seen our efforts," said Shangase, the Dry-Crop Co-ordinator. "We are really

pulling together. The only thing that can destroy us is nature."

But the Swaziland Co-op will not let nature destroy them without a fight. At present, they are working in shifts at night, watering their bean and maize crops by hand.

This Co-op has big plans. "We have already negotiated to sell our bean crop to the United Nations who need the beans for Mozambican refugees" explains Wellington Nhlengethwa, the Marketing Co-ordinator.

The first few months in a Co-op are hard. "We know that we have to wait for our first harvest to get wages," explains Robert. "but you can't owe the stomach." Realising that things would be tough in the beginning, the members met with many groups in Swaziland and negotiated a donation of several tons of maize, beans and oil from the European Economic Community. Now at least they can take food home for their families.

Each month the Co-op holds a general meeting of all members to get reports from their elected Co-ordinating Committee, to discuss problems and to plan production targets for the coming month.

They start each meeting by exchanging views and criticisms because as Hlatshwayo says "We can all learn from one another."

Their determination and commitment is something to see. On our arrival we were surprised to see that there were already neat residential rooms built on one side

of a cleared patch of land and a large store-room on the other.

Everywhere workers were busy. Some were making benches, some building a kitchen, others working in the fields.

Despite the fact that it took them so long to find affordable land, their unity and determination saw them through.

When asked what advice he would give to Co-ops just starting out, Comrade Hlatshwayo says "The hardest part of starting anything new, is lack of unity. Members must be encouraged to participate fully in the Co-op. This means that comrades must be disciplined, critical and committed to the production process within the Co-op."

Comrade Hlatshwayo's final word of advice: "Co-ops need people who are committed to helping themselves in order to succeed. Members have to take all education seriously, from sowing seeds, to watering and harvesting crops..."

"They should be realistic. It is only when members are realistic - when they are prepared to work hard, but at the same time not expect miracles overnight that a Co-op will succeed. It is only when members are realistic that they do not easily become discouraged when the first rain does not fall or the crops are slow in bringing in money.

"But when we see a good harvest it makes it all worthwhile - we are proving that although we are no longer miners, we are not defeated. We have become men of the soil and we are finally reaping the seeds we have sown."



Co-op workers discuss and plan production