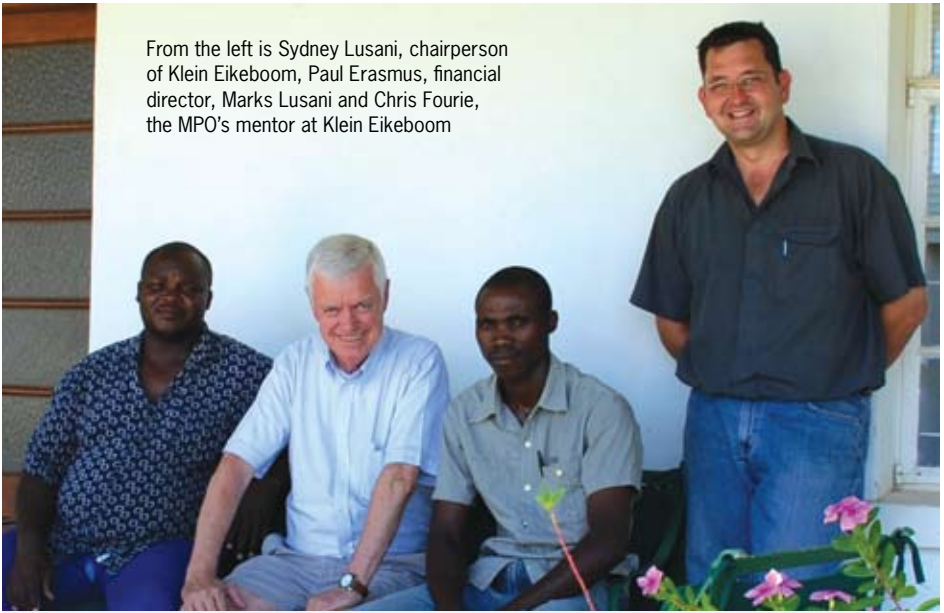


From the left is Sydney Lusani, chairperson of Klein Eikeboom, Paul Erasmus, financial director, Marks Lusani and Chris Fourie, the MPO's mentor at Klein Eikeboom



We stand together

by Karien de Villiers

Klein Eikeboom at the foot of the Berg River close to Wellington in the Western Cape, is a dairy success story in the making. This black economic empowerment project is the result of love for your fellow human beings, thankfulness and hard work.

At Klein Eikeboom everyone believes in true empowerment. That is why the beneficiaries have a majority share of 51%, says Paul Erasmus, the project's financial director.

"The people (16 beneficiaries) of Klein Eikeboom work incredibly hard," says Chris Fourie, a well-known herd consultant in the Western Cape and the Milk Producers' Organisation's (MPO) mentor at Klein Eikeboom.

According to Erasmus there was a time when the farm struggled to keep its head above the water. As with many other empowerment enterprises, Klein Eikeboom initially struggled with funding. For example, they had to wait for three years before the CASP-funding was approved by the government, says Erasmus.

But despite financial and logistical problems, the beneficiaries are very proud of what has already been achieved, and they are working eagerly to achieve their goals.

In the beginning

Erasmus is regarded as a very strong father figure at Klein Eikeboom. His bond with the project's shareholders is the main reason for the existence of the project. When he was 69 years old, Erasmus became seriously ill and could hardly hold a spoon in his hand. His doctors were ready to hospitalise him permanently. But Benile (Sydney Lusani), who is now the chairperson of Klein Eikeboom, insisted on caring for Erasmus at home.

Upon his recovery, Erasmus decided to show his gratitude by establishing a black economic empowerment project. He called all the people together and asked them what type of enterprise they would prefer to run. "They said that they wanted a dairy farm," says Erasmus.

Initially Erasmus pushed all of his capital into the project. Klein Eikeboom was bought in 2002 with money made available by Erasmus and the Western Cape Department of Agriculture. Milk was initially sold in black residential areas and to clients in the area.

"At certain times of the year sales did go down – especially during the winter months and when everyone returned to the Transkei," says Fourie. That is why they decided to rather deliver their milk to Vasco Cheese. This strategic move allowed Klein Eikeboom to expand its business.

And now this project and all the hard work, have started showing dividends. In 2005 the project had 200 cows delivering an average of 1 680 litres of milk per day. The average production per cow was 12 litres per day. Today the daily parlour average is 19 litres per cow.

Klein Eikeboom has 160 Jersey cows and 90 heifers. There are five Jersey-bulls on the farm. Although artificial insemination has improved the herd's potential, they decided to rather make use of stud bulls for now, says Fourie.

Mentorship and team work

The secret of successful mentorship does not always depend on training or the transfer of knowledge. It is rather about leading the trainee to make the right decisions. The Milk Producers' Organisation's Centre for Producer Development, Cendel, appointed Fourie to manage these important components of mentorship.

Fourie believes that funding means nothing, if there is no training. The benefit of mentorship is that one can share your experience. Fourie says that the success of a BEE-project such as Klein Eikeboom, depends on cooperation between different role players.

According to him, producers in the vicinity play an important role in the transfer of knowledge at Klein Eikeboom. This type of involvement gives mentees exposure to farming practices that succeed in specific circumstances.

"For example, producers in the vicinity can also help to ensure that mentees are offered market-related prices for their inputs."

Besides this, says Fourie, mentees must also be assisted in daily management and planning. Thus, good mentorship includes crisis management, longer term planning, loan applications and liaison with suppliers.

Fourie believes that suppliers have a major role to play in the transfer of knowledge. For this reason, he approached Andries Engelbrecht of Diversey Lever, to assist with parlour training. Dion Engelbrecht of Nova Feeds was asked to assist with feed training. Since their involvement, the parlour average has increased by three litres.

The Western Cape Department of Agriculture has also been involved with Klein Eikeboom for some time. Carel Müller, specialist dairy scientist at the department's Institute for Animal Production, has been involved with Klein Eikeboom in an advisory capacity, since August 2004.

The department also offered logistical, financial and infrastructure support, including obtaining funds from the Council for Scientific Industrial Research (CSIR), the national Department of Agriculture and the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) programme, which focuses on the redistribution of land for agricultural development.

But besides the financial grants, Müller also assisted the project, on behalf of the department, to purchase some 100 cows. He also saw to it that Klein Eikeboom joined the Agricultural Research Council's milk recording scheme.

Management systems are critical for any dairy operation. For this reason, Müller has put a number of systems in place, according to which the farm is run. One of his students, Vanessa Visser, originally assisted in dividing the cows into groups. She also helped to identify cows that needed to be examined for pregnancy. Visser is still involved with Klein Eikeboom.

One often wonders why one empowerment project works so well, while others that initially held promise, eventually failed. Perhaps Klein Eikeboom offers the solution in the form of a simple formula: Hard work, persistence and team work. **UM**



- 1 Sydney (left) and Marks Lusani in the fields
- 2 Marks (left) and Sydney Lusani together with Dion Engelbrecht, a consultant from Nova Feeds. Erasmus says that Engelbrecht does a lot by training the team. He is one of the main reasons why their production has increased