Restituted community in a lucrative “deal”

The Xi-Tsonga speaking Makuleke community in the vastly rural Pafuri area, situated in the north-eastern part of the Limpopo province, is one of the many indigenous tribes whose land had been returned in this new democratic dispensation under the Restitution programme following their forceful removal from their ancestral land in the 1960’s due to racially-inspired apartheid land legislations.

The area is largely rural and a lot of developmental groundwork is a necessity to create better living conditions that will stimulate local economic activities. The Pafuri area is approximately 70 kilometers from the South African/Mozambique border and lies next to the Northern entrance of the Kruger National Park to the Pafuri camp.

At the peak of forced removals, the Makuleke people had to repatriate from their area so that the Kruger National Park could be extended to the border of Zimbabwe, then known as Rhodesia.

Makuleke Restitution claim

After having lost their land to the management of Kruger National Park, the new dispensation made it possible for a redress process where all those who lost their land as a result of the 1913 and 1936 strict land legislations could lodge their land claims before the 1998 December cut-off date.

According to chairperson of the Makuleke Communal Property Association (CPA) Mr Livingstone Makuleke, they did not know how to initiate their claim given the little knowledge they had around the restitution process. “We started our engagement process by attending land reform workshops, meetings, seminars and all sorts of forums so that we could be clued up as to what to do then on”, says Livingstone.

When they finally lodged their restitution land claim at the stroke of deadline, a legal battle with the Kruger Park Management erupted. Kruger Park, managed by the South African National Parks (SANParks), objected to the validity of the Makuleke’s claim on the basis that the area claimed had been declared by the Environmental Affairs department as an area of “high protection with high biodiversity”. In simpler terms, the Kruger Management was deploying a book tactic referring to several pieces of legislations to prove that the land was a supposed “high protected” area.

After much consultation and deliberations, the Makuleke and SANparks reached a landmark agreement where the Wilderness Safaris would continue to manage the area and to receive gate fees at the Pafuri Gate but, the Makuleke would have rights of entering into a partnership with a private sector to develop an eco-
tourism enterprise on the restituted land. This arrangement between Wilderness Safaris and Makuleke would benefit the latter in terms of skills transfer; job creation; lease payments; and equity shares. This is a 45-year long agreement period with an option of renewal after every fifteen years. And according to the agreement, the Makuleke CPA will pocket 14 % of all income revenue every year.

**Way forward**

Without a shadow of doubt, the Makuleke restitution claim has brought much difference in the Pafuri area, which is situated approximately 70 kilometers of the Mozambican border. The area is largely rural and a huge section of the villagers live in traditional type of dwellings with unventilated pit latrines that are a haphazard. Today, young people from the area are employed at two private lodges - the Outpost and the Wilderness Safaris' Pafuri Camp - which were opened after the agreement between the Makuleke CPA and the SANparks. The structures are wooden-built family units which are fully-furnished and fitted with the necessities of a plush homestead.

Here villagers are employed as tourist guides, cheffs, bar attendants, security guards, receptionists and other essential areas of expertise. The area boasts an intricate wildlife with large mammals such as white rhinos, giraffes, blue wildebeest, lions, Burchell’s zebras and impalas freely loafing in the dense bushes.

There is a thriving community-based conservation and eco-tourism business at the Pafuri camp which in 2005 had led the Kruger Park management to move six white rhino, five giraffe, eight blue wildebeest, twenty-one Burchell’s zebra and 54 impala from the central district of the Kruger National Park to the Makuleke Concession. Other recreational activities offered at the Pafuri camp include a game drive; bird watching; hiking and walking excursions.

**Major challenges**

The Makuleke area or Pafuri falls under the jurisdiction of Thulamela local municipality where people live in traditional dwellings of separate stands and some, in mud roundavels. After their watershed agreement with the Kruger Park management, the CPA electrified over 1 500 households at the cost of R 4.8 million after it received its 14% profit-sharing figure from SANParks. According to His Royal, Chief Makuleke some of the challenges include building a new school and renovating old ones and a local clinic.

“In this way of introducing development, the community will be benefiting from our restitution claim and leading better lives. We’ll also introduce community-based projects where we will create jobs in our village as not everybody can be directly employed at our Pafuri camp”, says Chief Makuleke.
There is a great need for better access to water and sanitation including dealing with the issue of housing backlogs where government ought to build low-cost RDP houses for destitute villagers. There area is marked by a level of extreme poverty and under-development. People still go out to collect water and gather wood. Apart from an erratic water supply, there are backlogs in the provision of electricity and in the construction and maintenance of roads. There is also a low rate of economic growth in the Makuleke area which results in the high unemployment and poverty stakes. For now, their restitution claim has been a beacon of hope which they say has brought positive developments in their homes.