

A RURAL CLINICAL SCHOOL AS LEVERAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH'S HEALTH SCIENCES FACULTY

**Dr Therese Fish, Vice Dean: Community Interaction and Service, Faculty of Health Sciences,
University of Stellenbosch, South Africa
tfish@sun.ac.za**

Universities are well positioned to use their resources to assist the public and private sectors to develop strategies to address the problems of rural development. These resources include a range of educational programs which contribute to the development of the country's human and physical capital and are also able to coordinate and support research that improves the understanding of economic and community development issues, problems and opportunities. Increasing questions are being posed on the role of Higher Education Institutions in development. A healthy population is crucial to the wellbeing of a population and is therefore a pre-requisite for sustainable development.

In South Africa, almost 50% of communities live in rural areas which are generally worst affected by unemployment, poverty, malnutrition, poor education, lack of clean drinking water and appropriate facilities for refuse removal. All these factors contribute to the poor health status of people living in these rural areas. In order to address these challenges, sustainable rural development strategies need to be developed. Participatory relationships between affected communities and other stakeholders require increased efforts if the Millennium Development Goals are to be met.

In 2008, the Rector of the University of Stellenbosch presented his Overarching Strategic Plan (OSP), grounded in the Pedagogy of Hope. The OSP was identified as the vehicle through which the millennium developmental goals would be realized. The plan has five identified themes (environmental sustainability, human dignity, eradication of poverty, democracy and human security).

The Health Sciences Faculty (HSF) has already distinguished themselves in the field of rural health, by collaborating with the Provincial Department of Health (DoH) to maintain the competence of rural health professionals and by exposing undergraduate students to the health needs of rural people. The Ukwanda Centre for Rural Health has been active in the Boland/Overberg region of the Western Cape Province for more than 5 years, and has been involved in many small-scale community-interaction and research projects as well as facilitating undergraduate education in this region. However, there has been a growing awareness of the need for these initiatives to be greatly up-scaled and, crucially, for a greater appreciation of the interdependence of health and development.

Down the ages it has been shown that universities have the potential of adding immeasurable value to a city, town or village. Our vision for sustainable development of the Boland Overberg entails the establishment of a rural satellite campus (RSC) in Worcester, where a number of faculties can make a meaningful contribution to sustainable rural development. The interrelatedness of human security, health, self-perceived value, economic development and social upliftment, lends itself to integrate efforts by various academic departments throughout the university. Worcester as the largest town is ideally placed to serve as a rural node for training, research and community interaction. The population of 500 000 in the Boland Overberg region faces similar challenges of rural people throughout Africa and the developing world. Apart from being fairly representative of rural conditions elsewhere, Worcester has close geographical proximity to Stellenbosch.

The HSF has well-established links with provincial and regional health departments and with the Overberg municipality. The faculty has developed a strategic plan to establish a Rural Clinical School (RCS) in Worcester (addendum A). The RCS will mainly train health professionals and health care workers (from the surrounding communities), attracting students from previously disadvantaged communities by encouraging learners in rural schools to study subjects that will allow them entry to medical and allied health profession fields. Current plans include a 1-year clinical rotation for final year medical students and trainee specialists, as well as the establishment of a school for nursing. The establishment of a RCS provides the exciting opportunity to link with initiatives from other faculties (addendum B) to grow this into a truly sustainable rural development project with a dedicated focus on the issues that affect all aspects of human security in rural areas and it will include the development of local skills and expertise to benefit the whole region in a sustainable fashion. Candidate faculties could include the Faculties of Agri-sciences, Theology, Engineering, Law and Education many who already have projects which support sustainability. Furthermore, a successful model of a rural campus which successfully improves the lives of rural communities could serve as a model for other rural communities in South Africa.

The initiative has already received seed funding for the project both from government and the university.

